MISADVENTURE

BY

W. E. NORRIS

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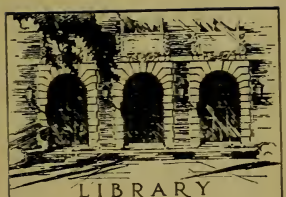

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MISADVENTURE

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF

"MY FRIEND JIM," "MAJOR AND MINOR," "LA BELLE AMERICAINE," "MATRIMONY," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON

SPENCER BLACKETT

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sermons, both doctrinal and practical, at him. If, after all this, he has chosen to go to the deuce, the consequences should be upon his own head, you think. But then comes the question of how far any of us are answerable for our proclivities, or ought to be punished for the natural results of them."

The speaker was a man whom most people would have pronounced at first sight to be nearer seventy than sixty, because his hair and his short beard were as white as snow, and because the clear, pale skin of his face was furrowed by such deep lines; but closer inspection conveyed the idea that these were lines of suffering, and that he was probably younger than he looked. As a matter of fact, he had at this time only just turned his fifty-first year. He was reclining, as he did all day long, in a wheeled chair close to a bay-window, whence he could survey some part of the broad lands which he owned but could not tread. Long periods of neuralgic or rheumatic pain (so called by the doctors, who could find neither a cause nor a cure for them) had culminated at length in what all the doctors were agreed in describing as creeping paralysis, and had changed into a frail worn-out wreck of humanity one whom many middle-aged people could remember as a keen sportsman, a

first-rate judge of a horse, and a very popular frequenter of London drawing-rooms. Even now he had not lost all trace of the good looks for which he had once been famous, nor had disease, trouble and disappointment robbed his smile of its good-humoured kindliness.

His friend, Mr. Lowndes, the Rector of Abbotsport, was his senior by some half-dozen years or so, and looked capable of outliving him by a quarter of a century at least. Tall, broad-shouldered and ruddy, his thick black hair and whiskers being only here and there streaked with grey, Mr. Lowndes, had it not been for the clerical garb that he wore, would have had a good deal more of the appearance of a country squire than the crippled invalid whom he sat facing, with a hand on each knee. He said:

"Now, Bligh, you are going to mount one of your fantastic hobbies. You want to excuse and explain everything upon some fanciful theory of inherited tendency, which can't hold water for a single moment. Added to which, you are paying a poor compliment to your forefathers by assuming that Morton inherited his tendencies from them. He certainly didn't get them from you."

"I should be sorry to be uncomplimentary to my

forefathers," said Mr. Bligh, with a smile, "but for anything I know to the contrary, there may have been some scoundrels amongst them. And I don't see anything fantastic or fanciful in stating an undeniable fact. You haven't bred as many horses as I have, still you are not ignorant about the subject, and I believe you have bred dogs. You know as well as I do what an important part hereditary tendency plays in that matter, and how often it crops up in an individual after lying dormant for generations."

"We're not talking of horses and dogs," returned Mr. Lowndes, "we're talking of a human being, with a soul and a conscience and a free will. We all of us have our besetting sins, I suppose—though I'm sure I don't know what yours can be—but our business is to conquer them, and if we fail we deserve to suffer for our cowardice. Suppose I have inherited a tendency to some disease—gout, for instance—am I to shrug my shoulders and give in, instead of taking measures to counteract it?"

"Judging by my own experience, I should be inclined to back the disease," said the other. "And then you must allow that we don't all start at even weights."

"Oh, well," said the Rector, a little impatiently—for

he was vexed with himself for having made use of an illustration which sounded somewhat unfeeling under the circumstances—"we needn't argue the point, because I am sure that we don't really differ. Excuses, no doubt, can be made for everybody, and let us hope that eventually they will be made. Meanwhile, with our imperfect knowledge of things, we are obliged to judge by what is apparent; and as for Morton—well, I will only say, as I said before, that I wish you wouldn't have him down here. He has refused scores of times when you have asked him; why should you accept his proposal now, when you are ill and when the sight of him is quite enough to make you worse?"

"Oh, I don't think the sight of him will produce that effect upon me," said Mr. Bligh, quietly.

"I do, then; I have known you too long, my dear Bligh, to be taken in by your affectation of stoicism. In all my life I have never met a man who bore pain better or who felt it more. Morton will give you pain every time he opens his lips—you know he will. What's more, he will try to give you pain."

"Perhaps not. I imagine his object in paying us this visit is quite the reverse of that."

"What is his object?" inquired the Rector, who,

however, could have answered his own question easily enough.

Mr. Bligh laughed. "After all," he said, "it is only what you and I should do under similar circumstances. Given a dying father, who has absolute control over the disposal of his property, shouldn't we think it our duty to seek him out and express to him a sincere regret for any little differences which might have arisen between us and him?"

"No," answered the Rector, stoutly; "neither you nor I would stoop to such meanness. Besides, you are not dying."

"So the doctors are kind enough to assure me. They say that I may live for a great many more years; but they think it will be a very strange thing if I do. Doctors, of course, can't tell the real truth, but there is no reason that I know of why patients shouldn't, when they happen to be aware of it. The real truth is always bracing and invigorating, though I admit that it often looks rather ugly from a distance; and the truth, I take it, is that Morton is coming because he has heard that his cousin Archie is here, and because that has very naturally alarmed him."

Mr. Lowndes had a pair of round, projecting brown

eyes, which now became rounder and projected themselves somewhat more prominently than usual. "Do you mean to say," he began, "that you really propose——"

"Oh no, I don't think it would be right or wise, or in any way desirable. All the same I wish Archie were my son. Even though he is younger than Morton, I might perhaps be justified in making an elder son of him in this case; but nephews, I suppose, must be regarded as out of the question. What do you think of him?"

"I think he is a fine, manly young fellow: I always did think so, and soldiering has improved him immensely. Still, as you say, he is only your nephew. I should have thought—will you allow me to speak my mind plainly to you, Bligh?"

"Haven't I just told you that the unvarnished truth is full of fascination for me?"

"Well, then, I should have thought that if you considered your son unworthy to succeed you—which he most undoubtedly is—you could have left this place to your daughter. I know you can provide for her amply without doing that, and I know that the management of a large property is a heavy burden to place on the shoulders of a young girl. Still, when one has

to face two evils one can but choose the smaller; and although Cicely is inexperienced, and a little headstrong at times, her heart is in the right place. And then she will marry. Surely it would be better for us all to have decent Christian people at the Priory than an avowed atheist."

"Is Morton an avowed atheist?"

"If he isn't he ought to be. Holding the views that he does, and living the life that he lives, he has no business to call himself anything else."

"Ah, I think I remember that he once got rather the better of you in a theological discussion."

"No, he didn't," returned the Rector, reddening slightly, "he didn't get the better of me at all. Of course he asked me questions which I couldn't answer; any Sunday-school child could do that—and indeed they often do. The times that I have been bothered with that tiresome old difficulty about the rainbow and its appearance in waterfalls and fountains! Why, only last week a wretched little whipper-snapper wanted me to explain how it was that Balaam showed so little surprise when his ass entered into conversation with him."

"I have always felt a good deal of curiosity upon that

point myself," observed Mr. Bligh. "What did you say?"

"I said that Balaam was a prophet, that he was accustomed to supernatural manifestations, and that an incident of that kind wouldn't be at all likely to astonish him. Then, if you please, my young gentleman wanted to know whether the mouth and tongue of an ordinary donkey were so formed that it would be possible for it to produce sounds resembling articulate speech. He didn't put it in those words, but that was the gist of his inquiries. Now I only mention this to show you how easy it is for a mere child to throw doubts upon the truth of the Scripture narrative."

"I quite see that it is very easy indeed," replied Mr. Bligh, gravely; "but we are wandering away from our rival candidates. Not that Archie is a conscious candidate—at least I hope he isn't."

"I am perfectly sure that no such notion has ever entered his head," cried the Rector, warmly.

"There is no occasion to be so sure as all that; such a notion might have entered his head without disgracing either it or his heart. I only meant to say that I hoped for his sake that he didn't cherish expectations which are so very unlikely to be fulfilled."

There was a pause of a few moments, after which Mr. Bligh resumed: "It will be rather amusing to watch them."

"To watch whom?" asked the Rector.

"Archie and Morton. Of course they will fight; Morton will take good care of that. But Morton never loses his temper, whereas Archie is decidedly peppery. I should say that Archie would get the worst of it."

"I don't see what there will be amusing in that," grunted Mr. Lowndes, who was a very straightforward, matter-of-fact sort of person, and did not sympathize with all his friend's moods. "I wish you wouldn't say such things, Bligh. They sound—not to me, because I know you—but to other people they might sound a little bit malicious."

"Cripples are always malicious," said Mr. Bligh; "they can't help it. So long as one lives one is bound to get some sort of fun out of existence; and what sort of fun is there within the reach of a man who has lost the use of his legs, except studying his fellow-creatures, and laughing in his sleeve at them? I lie here on my back from morning to night and watch you—Cicely and Archie and the servants, and the people who come to

call, and your reverend and respected self. You have no idea how funny you all are."

"Well, I'm glad that I'm not the only subject of ridicule, at all events," observed Mr. Lowndes, with a somewhat dissatisfied look. "What makes us so funny, if I may ask?"

"You would have to break your back before you could understand; and that perhaps is rather too long a price to pay for the privilege. I'm completely out of it, don't you see; I'm still alive, though I'm as good—or as bad—as dead; and that gives me a fine sense of the triviality of everything that excites the rest of you. What does it all matter? In quite a short time the whole generation of us will be wiped out and clean forgotten; isn't it a little comical that we should make so much ado about nothing?"

This (as possibly it may have been intended to do) drew from the Rector an eloquent vindication of the seriousness of life and the far-reaching consequences of every individual act. Furthermore, he thought fit to wind up with a final application of his remarks. "You have no right to say that you are 'out of it,' Bligh: on the contrary, very great power for good or for evil remains in your hands. The temporal, and for aught I

know, the eternal welfare of many people depends upon you, and you can't joke yourself free from your responsibilities. I think you ought to bear that in mind and consider it carefully before you decide to nominate as your successor a man who will—who will——"

"Who will play the deuce generally," suggested Mr. Bligh. "Well, I'll consider it—and him too. He seems to have challenged consideration, so that he can't complain. Nevertheless, I doubt whether any conceivable arrangement that I could make would be wholly satisfactory."

The Rector sighed, and went sorrowfully away. He was very much afraid that his old friend's days were numbered; he was pretty sure that his old friend would not set established custom aside in making his will, and he was quite convinced that infinite harm might be done in the parish of Abbotsport by such a Squire as Morton Bligh would be.

"It's all very unfortunate," he muttered to himself as he mounted his brown cob; "very unfortunate indeed!"

When he had ambled down the long, gently sloping approach, bordered on either side by rhododendrons, which were one of the chief glories of the Priory, and

when he had passed through an iron gate, which separated lawns, shrubberies and flower-beds from the park, he turned his horse off the road and cantered across the grass, until he reached a point from which he could look down upon the slate roofs of Abbotsport and the blue veil of smoke which hung motionless over them on that still afternoon of early spring. The little fishing village, overhung by lofty chalk cliffs and protected both from easterly and from westerly gales by sheltering promontories, had been made additionally safe and snug by a breakwater, constructed some years back at the expense of Mr. Bligh. The same munificent benefactor had supplied the inhabitants with the solid school-house, which Mr. Lowndes could descry, and had carried out a great many other works of public utility during his reign. There had always been Blighs at the Priory, and they had always owned the whole of Abbotsport; but they had been far less powerful, because far less wealthy, than the present holder of the estate, who, while still a young man, had inherited a large fortune from his mother's family. That he had spent his income wisely and well could not be denied. He had found Abbotsport poverty-stricken, dirty and overpopulated, and by dint of judicious expenditure, com-

bined with some exercise of authority, which had been at first resented, but subsequently acquiesced in (because improved circumstances always promote a spirit of toleration), he had converted the community over which he ruled into a prosperous and contented one. He had been a benevolent despot, but like other benevolent despots he laboured under the disadvantage of being mortal; so that there could be no certainty of the work which he had inaugurated being carried on.

"Besides, I am not sure that he hasn't sapped their independence," mused the Rector, as he gazed down on the little fleet of fishing smacks, which were stealing in before a very light, southerly breeze. "They have got too much into the habit of looking to the Priory for help the moment that anything goes wrong, and it's precious little help they are likely to get from Morton Bligh. Cicely would take care that their wants were supplied, at any rate, though no doubt she would be injudicious, and she has inherited her father's disinclination to be guided by advice. Still she would be sure to marry before long; and if she had a husband who was a decent fellow"—Mr. Lowndes paused for a moment in his meditation and tapped his boot pensively with the handle of his riding-whip. "Now, if Cicely

would marry her cousin," he resumed presently, "and I strongly suspect that her cousin wouldn't object to the arrangement—Good gracious, Archie, how you made me jump! You ought to know better than to play such tricks upon an old man whose reins are hanging loose. It's lucky that nothing ever startles the cob."

The young man, who had playfully thrown a fir-cone at the Rector's broad back, laughed and said: "The cob's ears are quicker than yours, Mr. Lowndes; he knew I was behind you two or three minutes ago."

This young man, who was tall, spare and broad-shouldered, and had a slight, fair moustache, with an upward twist to it, bore the marks of his profession as plainly as if he had been dressed in full cavalry uniform. Without being exactly good-looking, he possessed the beauty which belongs to youth and physical vigour, and he had a pleasant, smart, sunburnt appearance. Also his blue eyes seemed to belong to an honest mortal. "What were you dreaming about?" he asked. "About the future fate of that intemperate flock of yours?"

"Well, yes," answered the Rector. "I was thinking

about their future, poor fellows! Not that they are so very intemperate, except now and then, when they have had a great catch of fish, and even at such times they are a good deal better than they used to be. Nevertheless, I sometimes feel anxious about them. I've just seen your uncle, and he tells me that Morton is expected at the Priory this evening."

"Yes, I believe so; it's rather a bore. I don't know much about him, but I've always understood that he is an awful blackguard."

"He isn't so much that—at least not in the way that you probably mean. There's always hope for the sort of man whom you would call an awful blackguard."

"Oh! And isn't there any hope for Morton?"

The Rector shook his head. "I'll tell you what Morton is," said he; "he's a thoroughly bad-hearted fellow. You may have heard stories about him. I don't want to enter upon them, and indeed they are stories of a sort which you young fellows don't generally mention before parsons. It would be very wrong of me and quite against my duty and my conscience to make light of sin of any kind: yet there *is* a difference, you know. A man may be chivalrous in

spite of his wickedness. It isn't very long since Sir James Hannen addressed Morton Bligh from the Bench in words which—which, upon my honour, I think I would rather have been hanged than have heard addresseed to me. But I don't believe he cared."

"Everybody said he behaved thundering badly," observed the young man. "I was in India at the time, you know; so I only heard about it through the newspapers. Was that why Uncle Wilfrid quarrelled with him?"

"Oh, there wasn't any quarrel. Your uncle never quarrels; and if he had meant to wash his hands of Morton, as most fathers would have done, he might have found ample excuse for that years ago. I don't mind telling you that that is what I should have done. As a general principle, I am opposed to placing women in positions of authority, but supposing I had to choose between Cicely and Morton my choice would be very soon made."

"Only Cicely will marry some day, I suppose."

"Yes; but when she does, her husband won't have things all his own way. That fortunate fellow—because he will be a very fortunate fellow—may as well

make up his mind to accept the part of a prince-consort."

The Rector looked rather hard at his companion, who gazed imperturbably out to sea, and then he added, with an abrupt chuckle: "Put that in your pipe and smoke it, young man."

CHAPTER II.

MISS BLIGH

The young lady who Mr. Lowndes had quite accurately described as possessing a strong will of her own was, at the time when she was being thus criticized, discharging one of the duties incident to her station in life, by visiting the poor. There were always plenty of poor people in the village of Abbotsport, which, being situated at a distance of three miles (and mostly up-hill miles) from the nearest railway station, could not dispose of its fish with the ease and profit enjoyed by some of its neighbours on the south coast. However, they were none of them destitute, nor in any danger of becoming so, because they had Miss Cicely Bligh, as well as her father, to look after them. Whenever Miss Cicely walked down to the village (and that was three or four times a week on an average) she carried on her arm a basket, which was heavy on leaving the Priory and light on its return. For this reason she was always

a welcome visitor, and if her instructions and rebukes were rather more peremptory than some folks thought becoming in one so young, yet they were magnanimous enough to pardon her in consideration of her pretty face and her kind heart, and smiled with good-humoured toleration, when her back was turned, at her mania for cleanliness, her determination that everybody should go to church once a week, and all her other little fads and fancies. In reality, the housewives of Abbotsport were mortally afraid of her, though they would have died rather than admit such a thing.

It mattered very little to Cicely whether they admitted or denied a circumstance of which she was fully aware. She knew that she could always carry her point, whatever it might be, and the only thing she regretted was that people should ever waste time by arguing with her, when it would have been so much more simple and sensible to give in at once. To be sure she shared the inestimable boon, with which Abbotsport at large was blessed, of being seldom pressed for time. On this particular afternoon she had gone her rounds and had administered her charities, together with a few necessary scoldings, as usual, and now she thought she would stroll down to the harbour

and see the trawlers come in. So she made her way along the steep streets to the water side—a natty, well-proportioned, and very upright little figure, with her long sable boa flung back over her shoulders and her empty basket swinging.

Cicely Bligh had the family features, which were such as the family had no reason to complain of. Her nose was slightly aquiline; but it was such a diminutive specimen of that class that nobody with the slightest sense of the fitness of terms would have dared to call it a hook. Her upper lip, which was very short, had an outward curve; the lower one was somewhat full; her chin was perfectly rounded, without being too prominent, her dark eyebrows were straight, and from beneath them there looked forth a pair of large, steadfast, grey eyes, for the discomfiture of evil-doers and the sad undoing of susceptible young men. She was, beyond all reach of rivalry, the beauty of the county; and how could she help knowing it when she had been told as much such a number of times? She did not, however, value herself so much upon her good looks—which were hers by clear right of inheritance, and, therefore, not worth boasting about—as upon her strict integrity of purpose, and her truly remarkable accuracy

of judgment. To these fine qualities she flattered herself that her claim was undisputed; and so, in truth, it was, because nobody wanted to dispute it with her. From her father—the only human being to whom she owed or owned allegiance—she met with little or no opposition, her views and tastes being fortunately very much the same as his own. Illness had of late so incapacitated him that he had been compelled to manage a great part of his affairs vicariously, and from being his delegate his daughter had insensibly become his substitute. As for her aunt, Miss Skipwith, who had been asked to stay a few weeks at the Priory soon after Mrs. Bligh's death and who had remained there for fifteen years, Cicely had never been told to regard that lady as placed in authority over her, and had never dreamt of doing so. Thus she was about as independent as a young woman can be; and perhaps rather more so than it is good for any young woman to be, seeing that the absolute equality of the sexes has not yet been admitted, even in the most progressive countries.

The trawlers, of which Abbotsport boasted but four, had already entered the harbour when she reached it, and a knot of more or less interested persons had collected on the pier, to watch them discharge their load

of fish and to help in carting it away. This was a somewhat lengthy operation—because, as has been mentioned, Abbotsport disdained hurry—but Cicely waited patiently until it was almost completed, when she caught sight of a weather-beaten, grey-bearded man, who touched the brim of his sou'-wester to her with a slightly deprecating air.

"Coppard," said she, fixing her eyes upon him severely, "I am surprised to see you going out with the trawlers among these boys. I should have thought you might have found some better employment than that."

"You're right there, Miss," answered the man, "as you mostly are. Come to my time o' life, better employment I ought to have, and that's Gospel truth. But food must be purvided for the young 'uns some way or other, and times is terribly bad just now."

"Times are bad with you, you mean," interrupted Cicely, "and no wonder! I didn't see you at church on Sunday, Coppard."

"You did not, Miss," replied Mr. Coppard, with a great show of straightforward candour. "You did not see me, for the reason that I were not there. I were very porely o' Sunday and compelled for to keep my bed."

"You couldn't expect to be anything else after having been disgracefully intoxicated all Saturday."

"What?—me, Miss?" cried Mr. Coppard, in extreme astonishment. "Me disgracefully intox—well, I never! Who could ha' been and told you such a thing as that about me in my habsence?"

"The same person who told me that you had sold your share in the *Rover* and spent all the money. It really is too bad, Coppard."

"So 'tis, Miss; and a great refreshment it has been to me to get two nights at sea beyond reach o' that there woman's tongue. 'Spent all the money,' says she! And her with a new gownd to her back—as you might ha' noticed o' Sunday, Miss, and did notice, I make no doubt. But she's well known far and wide for what she is, and there ain't a six year old child in Abbotsport as pays any manner o' heed to *her* talk."

"When I have seen that new gown I shall believe that poor Mrs. Coppard got it from you," observed Miss Bligh, placidly. "I am afraid it is useless to remonstrate with you, and certainly it is quite useless to try and help you. I am very sorry now that I asked my father to buy a share in the *Rover* for you."

"Now don't 'ee say that, Miss. Squire he hacted for

the best—likewise yourself; but as for getting a living out of part share in a hopen boat, 'taint to be thought of, Miss; and what I do I do for the sake of my family as should be more grateful to me."

"I really think there is something in that, Miss Bligh," chimed in a gentle and deferential voice from the background. "A man must catch a great many dabs and congers before he can expect to get a fair day's wages for a fair day's work."

Cicely whisked round sharply, and was thus brought face to face with a young man in a blue serge suit, who took off his cap to her. He was a young man of something under middle height, square-built, clean-shaven and fresh-complexioned. He was as evidently a sailor as Archie Bligh was a soldier, and if a little less smart-looking than that gentleman was certainly handsomer, his features being quite classic in their regularity, and his big brown eyes almost as expressive as a dog's. Cicely held out her hand to him with a little air of condescension and patronage. "Oh, how do you do, Bobby?" said she. "Have you been out with the trawlers?"

"That he has, Miss," answered Coppard, who perhaps was not unwilling to bring about a change of subject;

"and though I don't care to flatter no one, I will say there's not a many officers in Her Majesty's Navy as can sail a boat like Captain Dare."

"Not *Captain* Dare, surely," said Cicely. "I know you are no longer a midshipman, Bobby, but I didn't know you had jumped up quite so high as that."

"Sub-lieutenant," answered the individual entitled to that rank, modestly. Then he added in an apologetic tone, "I can't be so near blue water without wanting to be upon it; so as these fellows offered to take me trawling with them, I thought I would go and see what it was like. We've had good luck and fine weather, I am glad to say; but it must be a hard life in the winter time."

Bobby Dare was one of the many sons of Sir George Dare, who shared with Mr. Bligh the pre-eminence in the southern county where the properties of both of them were situated. Cicely had known Bobby all her life, and was well aware that he had humbly adored her from his infancy. She said: "I don't think I should much care to spend a night on board a trawler. How did you manage about washing and dressing in the morning?"

"Well, I jumped overboard and had a swim," said the young man. "Do I look very grubby?"

Cicely took a calm aud deliberate survey of him from head to foot. "Not more so than might have been expected," she replied, at length. "And so Coppard has been talking you over? I daresay he would find it easy enough to do that."

The young sailor laughed, pushed his cap to the back of his head and glanced over his shoulder. Perceiving that Coppard had judiciously effected a movement of retreat, he said: "I confess that I have a sneaking affection for that old rascal. I suppose he gets drunk now and then, like the rest of them, and I know he's an arrant poacher; but for all that he's a fine seaman. So are most of these fellows, for that matter. Oh, dear! what a pity it is that press-gangs have been done away with!"

"If you could kidnap our fishermen they would be very much thrown away in the navy, I think," Cicely declared. "What is the use of fine seamanship on board one of those hideous iron hulks that you call men-of-war? Besides, you never have any fighting to do."

"Perhaps we shall, though, one of these days," returned Mr. Dare, hopefully. "Even as it is, we often have to help the soldiers out ashore."

"In skirmishes with savages, you mean? But isn't

that rather poor fun? You see, you are quite certain of being able to beat them, with the weapons that you have. If I were a man I would much rather be in the cavalry, like Archie," said Cicely, to provoke him.

But Bobby was of far too simple and modest a nature to be irritated by such malicious attacks.

"It is a matter of taste," said he. "We can't be all in the cavalry, and I shouldn't have done for it even if the governor could have stood the expense, because I never could make head or tail of a horse. But I daresay I shall do my duty as well as Archie when the time comes. At least I hope so."

"Of course you will do it a great deal better, you dear, stupid old Bobby!" said Miss Bligh, who always chose to talk to this neighbour of hers as though he had been much younger than herself. "You belong to the class out of which heroes are made, and will certainly end your career as an Admiral of the Fleet and a G.C.B., if only we give you the chance of distinguishing yourself by fighting the French or the Russians or somebody. Archie isn't that sort of person at all. One can't fancy Archie flourishing a Field Marshal's bâton, and I'm sure he doesn't want such a thing."

A slight flush of pleasure had overspread Mr. Dare's cheeks when he heard himself described as a potential hero, but he did not appear to be altogether satisfied with Cicely's criticisms upon her cousin.

"You must like him very much, or you wouldn't run him down," was his comment upon them.

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, with a wondering look.

"Only that I think you often run down the people whom you care for. You don't mind giving a little pat on the back to the others—such as myself."

"You are rather rude, and rather ungrateful," Cicely remarked. "I am not at all in the habit of running anybody down, except, just occasionally, a few persons who deserve it; but I certainly do like Archie very much. Have you any objection to my liking him?"

Bobby did object very strongly to her entertaining anything beyond a sisterly affection for her cousin. But he could hardly say so without proceeding to further statements which he was not prepared to make on the spur of the moment; so he only said, rather despondingly, "Archie is the sort of fellow whom everybody is bound to like."

"Aunt Susan doesn't," said Cicely, laughing; "she calls him a 'designing young man.'"

"Oh—Miss Skipwith! But then she hardly counts, does she? I mean, of course, she is a good old thing and all that, only nobody pays much attention to her."

"No, nobody pays much attention to her," agreed Cicely, in a somewhat grave voice.

During the above conversation they had been moving slowly away from the quay, and were now mounting the steep street which led in the direction of the Priory. It did not lead towards Instowe, where Sir George Dare lived; but perhaps Bobby was not eager to take the shortest way home.

"Why does she call Archie designing?" he asked presently.

"Oh, I suppose she thinks that my father will make him his heir instead of Morton. One can't wonder at her thinking so. My father won't do it, but it is what a great many people would do."

After this there was silence for some minutes. Then Bobby said, "My sisters told me that your brother was expected down here. Is that true?"

"Yes; he wrote to propose it himself, and he is to

arrive this evening. Probably he has the same idea as Aunt Susan, and thinks it is time for him to bestir himself." After a pause the girl resumed: "I don't feel as if he were my brother at all. I have only seen him twice in my life, and I didn't like him. Is it wrong, I wonder, to dislike one's brother when he is so very disagreeable?"

"It can't be wrong, or you wouldn't do it." answered Bobby, with conspicuous imbecility. "Besides," he continued, "I never met any one who didn't hate Morton. It is just like him to make up to poor Mr. Bligh at the last, after turning his back upon him all these years."

Now this was a perfectly true and justifiable speech, but the effect of it upon Cicely was not quite what the speaker could have wished. "What do you mean by 'the last?'" she exclaimed, turning upon him angrily. "It is abominable of you to say such things! I don't mind the people in the village, because it is their way of showing sympathy, and when they are in the least ill they always think they must be going to die; but you have no right to be so stupid, and so—so brutal. You must know perfectly well that my father is not

a bit worse than he was a year ago. Don't you know it?"

Bobby might have replied that he had been afloat a year ago, and consequently had not seen Mr. Bligh at the time referred to; also, if he had been strictly honest he would have had to say that he thought Mr. Bligh very ill indeed. But he did neither of these things; he only stammered out in accents of deep contrition, "Oh, I beg your pardon; I'm awfully sorry; I didn't think of what I was saying. I—I daresay he isn't nearly as bad as he looks."

"Well," said Cicely, more calmly, "you know nothing at all about it; that's one comfort. The truth is that his general health is perfectly good; and although he may never be able to walk again" (here Cicely's eyes suddenly filled with tears and her voice trembled) "there is nothing—nothing at all in his present condition to make us feel alarmed about him. I have Sir Peter Parsons's authority for saying so, and I suppose you will admit that Sir Peter understands his business."

Bobby hastened to declare that he never for a moment thought of setting up his opinion against that of the eminent physician in question. Indeed he was

certain that Sir Peter might be right. Still, of course, Morton might think differently.

This explanation having been more or less graciously accepted, he felt encouraged to ask whether Miss Bligh wouldn't like to come out fishing some day. Coppard, he said, had assured him that there was plenty of pollock in the bay, and sometimes one could have a lot of fun with a big conger. "And if it's necessary for you to have a chaperon," he added, a little reluctantly, "perhaps Miss Skipwith would come."

At this Cicely burst out laughing. "I really believe Aunt Susan would rather get on the back of a horse than trust herself in a boat," said she. "I'll go out fishing with you some day, Bobby, and I daresay I may bring Archie with me if he cares to come. I certainly sha'n't require a chaperon to look after me in the company of my own cousin and a boy like you. Now I have taken you quite far enough out of your way. Good-night."

Sub-lieutenant Dare, who was two-and-twenty years of age, did not quite relish being called a boy, but it was something to have obtained Cicely's assent to his modest proposition, and it was something to know that Miss Skipwith might be dispensed with. As for Archie,

perhaps he wouldn't want to come. "And perhaps if he does come he will be sick," thought the young sailor.

It is thus that love, which is in itself so pure and beautiful a sentiment, is wont to inspire even the most generous minds with ignoble desires.

CHAPTER III.

THE HEIR-APPARENT

ALL his life long Archie Bligh had been practically his own master. It is a fate which is usually considered to be undesirable for the young; yet it has its alleviations, and Archie, for his part, had never felt disposed to repine at it. Of his father he had no recollection at all; his mother, who had idolized him and done her best to spoil him (but had not succeeded), had died while he was still at Sandhurst; and as his Uncle Wilfrid thus became his nearest relation, it was natural that he should have spent at the Priory such holiday time as remained to him before he was gazetted to the 24th Lancers. The Priory, indeed, had always been a sort of second home to him, so that when, after an absence of three years in India, he returned with his regiment to his native shores, the first use that he made of his leave was, of course, to betake himself to Abbotsport. Perhaps it was almost equally a matter

of course that the first thing he did upon arriving there was to fall over head and ears in love with his cousin Cicely; for there was scarcely a young man within a twenty mile radius of that enchantress's abode who was not in the same sad case. Archie, to be sure, might have remained exempt, seeing that Cicely and he had been companions as children, and that he had not been at all in love with her then; but that was because his youthful affections had been given to the eldest Miss Dare, who was now approaching her thirtieth year and had never been remarkable for personal beauty.

One cannot be a dashing young cavalry officer and possess a snug little fortune of one's own without having been made the object of flattering attentions on the part of the ladies who frequent garrison towns. Archie, therefore, knew something of women, and thought that he knew a great deal. And this rendered him low-spirited; for his experience convinced him that Cicely had by no means fallen a victim to his attractions. She did not even seem to be aware that he had fallen a victim to hers; although he had done his best to place that fact outside the range of scepticism. She made no stranger of him; she treated

him very much as if he had been her brother—not to say her younger brother—she did not exert herself to entertain him, and took it for granted that he could amuse himself in his own way without her help. That very afternoon, when he had offered to accompany her to the village, she had laughed in his face, remarking, "I don't think you could visit any of my poor people without longing to be rid of me, and I am sure I couldn't visit any of them without longing to be rid of you." So he had been reduced to the necessity of taking a solitary walk into the country, which is a very dismal way of spending an afternoon. After his meeting with Mr. Lowndes, he sauntered down the hill towards Abbotsport, and in due course of time his hopes were fulfilled by the appearance of his cousin, who greeted him from afar with a wave of her empty basket.

"Am I late for dinner?" she asked, when he quickened his pace and joined her. "Did they send you to look for me?"

"Oh dear no," said Archie, consulting his watch, "there's heaps of time before dinner; I did come to look for you, but that was on my own hook, and because I thought that perhaps, if I had the luck to

meet you, you would let me walk home with you. What a long afternoon this has been!"

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Cicely, with half-ironical compassion; "I suppose it must be desperately slow for you down here. What have you been doing with yourself since luncheon?"

"Nothing, in the fullest sense of the word. And what have you been doing?—if I may ask."

"Well, I have distributed jellies and bunches of grapes to sick people, and I have listened to the domestic woes of Mrs. Coppard, and I have seen the trawlers come in, and I have administered a well-deserved scolding to Coppard, and I have had an interview with Bobby Dare, who, by the way, had returned from a two days' cruise with the fishermen. Just imagine sleeping on board a trawler for pleasure! Why is it that sailors always want to be at sea when they are ashore, and that soldiers hate nothing so much as the sight of a red coat when they are on leave?"

"Because sailors are usually men of one idea," said Archie, promptly. "Other people like to have a change occasionally."

"And you are beginning to think that you would

like a change now, I daresay. I don't wonder at it: only, selfishly speaking, I wish you could bring yourself to stay here until Morton takes his departure. I don't want to have Morton left upon my hands. I don't understand him, and, what is more, I'm afraid of him."

"I don't believe you're afraid of anybody or anything in the world," returned her cousin; "but of course I shall be only too glad to stay here until I'm turned out, and I'll do my best to be civil to your brother."

"Will you?" asked the girl rather eagerly; "I hope you will. He will certainly try to provoke you, but if you will bear in mind that that is what he wants, and if you will decline to be provoked, you will not only disappoint him but make things much smoother for the rest of us."

"Oh, I'll keep my temper," said Archie, with a laugh. "He seems to be an amiable sort of chap. Why should he want to provoke me?"

Cicely looked at him with a somewhat pitying smile. The reason was so obvious that he might surely have divined it. However, she liked him none the less for his obtuseness and only said: "Morton isn't amiable; he tries to provoke most people. He used to succeed

with me; but I don't mean him to succeed again, and I hope he won't with you."

"Does he succeed with Dare?" asked Archie after a pause.

"I don't think he has ever had the chance; but anyhow he wouldn't be likely to consider poor Bobby worth powder and shot."

The slightly contemptuous tone in which this opinion was enunciated reassured Archie upon a point as to which he had begun to feel certain misgivings, and when he parted from his cousin and went upstairs to dress for dinner, he felt in a sufficiently good humour to face any number of disagreeable strangers.

The Priory, as regarded a large portion of its outer walls, was an ancient structure; but it had been constantly added to by its present owner, while the interior had been so thoroughly restored, re-modelled, and redecorated, that it was to almost all intents and purposes modern. Many people, of course, thought this a pity, and said so; but then as Mr. Bligh was wont to remark, in answer to these criticisms, they had not been called upon to live in the old house. He and his architect had done their best with the materials at their command. The fine old entrance-hall and the broad oak

staircase had been left intact, and dark corridors, broken by unexpected steps, still afforded a somewhat dangerous channel of communication with the bedrooms; but, since it had been found impossible to retain the distinctive character of the building in the living-rooms, all attempts to reconcile mediævalism with modern requirements had been abandoned there, and the library, to which Archie betook himself in the course of half an hour, was, as the critics complained, "utterly characterless." It was, however, spacious, cheerful, and sunny, when there was any sun to shine.

It was in this room that Mr. Bligh now spent nearly the whole of the day, and here Archie found him, resting in his wheeled chair by the bay window, and with a slightly troubled look upon his usually placid face. Beside him sat his sister-in-law, Miss Skipwith, whose face was seldom placid and now displayed signs of unwonted agitation and excitement. "I can't think it wise, Wilfrid," she was saying, as Archie entered.

There were a good many things and there were two people at the Priory which and whom Miss Skipwith could not think wise. She was a thin, anxious, nervous little woman, with fluffy flaxen hair, which was turning grey, and prominent pale blue eyes. She was very

much in awe of Mr. Bligh, although she had a poor opinion of his sagacity, and she worshipped her niece, of whose manners and customs she strongly disapproved. Her whole life was a mild protest, which those who lived under the same roof with her accepted smilingly and never thought of resenting.

"Who has been making a fool of himself now, Miss Skipwith?" inquired Archie.

Miss Skipwith, who had never had any great affection for this young man and thought him disposed to be impertinent, drew herself up, compressed her lips, and made no reply; but Mr. Bligh said: "Oh, you'll see presently, and I daresay you will agree with Susan. Nevertheless, I might have made an even greater fool of myself if I had refused to receive my only son. The most foolish thing that anybody can do is to put himself gratuitously in the wrong. Perhaps, if sufficient opportunity is given to him, Morton may do that, and then Susan will think better of me. Doesn't that strike you as a wise way of looking at things?"

Archie was fond of his uncle, because the latter had always been kind to him and had been a good sportsman in bygone days; but he was not fond of irony, which

he would probably have defined as a needless and irritating habit of saying what you didn't mean. "I don't know anything at all about it," he answered rather curtly.

At this moment the door opened and Cicely and her brother entered the room together. There was a strong family resemblance between them; but this resemblance, as the most careless observer must have noticed at a glance, was only skin deep. Morton Bligh had been a very handsome man, and was so still, despite his waxy, unhealthy complexion, and the grey threads in his dark hair. Like his sister he was small, well-proportioned, and had delicately moulded features; but his eyes and mouth differed greatly from hers, the former being narrow, glittering and too close together, while his lips were thin and had acquired an habitually smiling set which had no suggestion of mirth about it.

"I don't think you have ever met your cousin Archie before, Morton," said Mr. Bligh.

"Don't remember to have had that pleasure," answered the new-comer, holding out a limp, white hand. "Been in India, haven't you—or somewhere? I forget whether you're a plunger or a gunner."

Archie explained good-humouredly that he was

neither the one nor the other, and mentioned the distinguished corps to which he had the honour to belong.

"Oh, ah!—the 24th Lancers, of course," said the other. "Beg your pardon, I'm sure. I suppose a Lancer doesn't like being called a plunger, does he?"

"That entirely depends upon who calls him so," said Archie.

"Really? Well, I hope you mean that you don't mind my having called you so. The fact is that I know very little about soldiers; though I believe I was once in the Yeomanry myself. I joined the Yeomanry to please you, you know," he added, turning to his father.

"And retired to please yourself," observed Mr. Bligh.

"Exactly so. I'm too much given to pleasing myself; but it's never too late to mend, and I'm going to turn over a new leaf now. The fact of my being where I am at this moment is a pretty convincing proof of that."

"You don't flatter us," said Miss Skipwith, drily.

"My dear Aunt Susan, I'm incapable of it; I don't know how to flatter people, and it has been a great

disadvantage to me through life. Besides, you would never have believed me if I had told you that I came here for the pleasure of seeing you all."

Mr. Bligh laughed a little at this, but the other three persons present remained grave and felt the announcement of dinner to be a relief. Morton, however, did not seem to consider a change of subject obligatory or desirable. While he was eating his soup he explained that much as he hated the country he had thought it best to familiarize himself with it, and with the management of a property which in the natural course of things must shortly be his. "One may not be enamoured of one's station in life," said he, "still as one can't escape from it, the only plan is to endeavour to fit oneself for it."

Cicely reddened with suppressed anger; Archie was greatly shocked and scandalized; and Miss Skipwith, in a high tremulous voice, began to talk about the danger that was sure to be done to the fruit-blossoms by the late frosts. But Mr. Bligh appeared to be much more tickled than annoyed at the calmness with which his approaching demise was counted upon. Morton was in many respects a queer, distorted reproduction of himself, and he recognized this with some inward

amusement. He himself had always had a great love for truth, and a great contempt for the phrases in which it is customary to wrap up truth; only as he was courteous and kind-hearted, he could not have expressed himself as Morton did. That his son did not love him he was perfectly aware, and that his son should make no secret of the fact scarcely disturbed him. What, perhaps, he did not quite realize was that his son was a very clever fellow.

That was certainly not the opinion formed of him by Archie, who thought he had never met such a brute in his life. Archie, as has been said, was accustomed to look upon the Priory as his home, and had some right to do so, whereas Morton had not been near the place for many years. It was, therefore, not a little exasperating to the former to be treated by the latter as a guest. After Miss Skipwith and Cicely had left the dining-room, Morton (who was rapidly disposing of a decanter of port) urged him to have another glass of claret, begged him to smoke if he felt inclined, and apologized for the dulness of Abbotsport, where, he said, one really had no business to ask a man to stay at that season of the year. Mindful of the promise that he had made, Archie kept his temper

and responded civilly; but Morton's whole demeanour made his blood boil, and later in the evening he confided to Cicely that if that fellow meant staying, he was afraid he would have to go.

"I thought you would," remarked the girl, rather sadly; "I am not at all surprised at it."

"I won't go if you would rather I didn't," said Archie, brightening up a little.

"Well, I told you that I didn't want to have Morton left on my hands; and I told you that he would try to provoke you. Can't you manage to despise him?"

"Oh, yes, I think I can manage that much," replied the young man with a short laugh.

"I mean can't you manage not to care what he says or does? My father isn't angry, you see; yet he has rather more reason to be angry, perhaps, than you have."

"I'll try to imitate him," answered Archie, sighing. "It isn't going to be easy, though, I can see."

He was young and peppery, while his uncle was old and philosophical, sick and weary. Moreover, his uncle, after all, was master of the house, and of the situation, which made a difference. One may put up with a good deal of insolence and bad temper from a man whom it is in one's power to disinherit at any moment. Still,

Archie was resolved to exercise self-control, and his resolution was put to a tolerably severe test when Morton and he had adjourned to the smoking-room.

"Cicely," observed Morton, after offering his cousin a cigar, "has grown up into a devilish good-looking girl. I suppose one will have to find a husband for her soon."

"I should think she would choose for herself," said Archie, shortly.

"Well, it will save trouble if she does—supposing she makes a reasonable choice, that is. But she strikes me as a rather unreasonable sort of young woman. Added to which, there's nobody for her to choose down here. A season in London might open her eyes a little."

"In what way?" inquired Archie.

"Oh, I don't say that it would make a reasonable being of her: there are so few reasonable beings about. But it would probably enlighten her as to her own market value, which is really a good bit above the average. You may depend upon it that the governor won't leave her a penny less than thirty thousand pounds."

"Oh, that is her market value, is it?" said Archie. "Fortunately she is not likely to offer herself for sale."

Morton screwed up his eyes and laughed unplea-

santly. "You think she will marry for love then?" said he.

"Yes, that is what I think, certainly."

"We must try to save her from making such an idiot of herself. Love is delightful; nobody has been more often in love than I have, and nobody appreciates the emotion more thoroughly. But then I have never made the mistake of imagining that it could last more than two years at the very outside. Marriage is another affair altogether; marriage is essentially a bargain, and women are very well aware of that."

"You speak as though all women were alike."

"So they are, my dear fellow. The popular belief is that there is a great gulf fixed between good and bad women; but that's nonsense. They differ in their talk, but they no more differ in their actions than men do."

"I should have said that men differed a good deal in their actions," observed Archie.

"That's only because circumstances vary; it isn't because human nature varies. It wouldn't occur to you to steal a leg of mutton; but you would a great deal rather steal a leg of mutton than be hungry. We're all tarred with the same brush: only it isn't supposed to be the proper thing to say so."

"I don't know how that may be," said Archie, "but I know that if I had a sister, I shouldn't like to talk about her as you do about yours."

"You wouldn't like to face facts, you mean; very few people do. Still it's the safest plan, upon the whole; and one unquestionable fact is that Cicely won't fall a prey to a fortune-hunter if her affectionate brother can prevent it."

To this Archie made no rejoinder; but throwing his cigar into the fire, got up and went to bed. It might be possible, he thought, to avoid quarrelling with Morton, but it was quite impossible to help wanting to break his neck.

CHAPTER IV.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF

In the drawing-room of a small but artistically furnished house in Clarges Street, a lady was seated, scribbling off notes and letters with a great appearance of haste. This was the Countess Souravieff, a name pretty well-known in all European capitals, except London, and now in a fair way to achieve notoriety there also. That the Countess would ever achieve anything more than that doubtful advantage was, perhaps, not very likely; because in these days political adventurers have to contend almost everywhere against democratic institutions, which limit the scope of their ingenuity. Still she was in some degree a personage. Diplomatists took her into account; Prime Ministers (one or two of them at all events) asked her to dinner and listened with interest to what she had to say; and the police kept a solemn and watchful eye upon her movements. This pleased her very much; for she was an ambitious

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woman, and, what was more, she was quite in earnest. If there was one thing about which Madame Souravieff was more certain than another (and she was certain about a remarkable number of things) it was that the Slavonic races were destined to rule the world. That being so, the sooner the Slavonic races got into the saddle the better, and she was now devoting all her energies to giving them a leg up. With this end, and with certain subordinate and private ends of her own in view, she had taken a house in Mayfair for the season, and initiated friendly relations with a few politicians and journalists, and explained to sundry great ladies that if she did not live with her husband, that was only because her husband was a man for whom it was impossible to feel anything but antipathy. She was not divorced from him; she was not even separated from him; but, since they could not meet without disagreeing, they had thought it advisable to meet as seldom as might be.

Judging by the quantity of invitation cards which lay upon her writing-table, the great ladies had considered these excuses sufficiently valid, and there was every prospect of Madame Souravieff proving herself a social, if not a political, success. She had been a very pretty woman, and one would not have thought of

employing the pluperfect tense in speaking of her had it not been for a few grey hairs in the neighbourhood of her temples and a slight inclination towards *embonpoint* in her figure. Her complexion and her teeth were as perfect as they had always been, and her large, dark eyes quite as expressive. One kind of critic might have objected that her cheekbones were a little too high, and another kind that she had loaded her white fingers with rather too many jewels : in other respects there was really no fault to be found with her appearance.

Her epistolary labours were interrupted every now and then by the entrance of a grave butler, who brought her cards upon a silver tray. Some of them he merely handed to her and then retired ; others appeared to call for some response, and this was always given in the same words—"I do not receive." It was not until the afternoon had become evening that this formula was departed from in favour of a gentleman whose card bore the name "Mr. Mark Chetwode." The butler, who was an observant man, and naturally wanted to find out anything that he could about the foreign lady whose service he had only just entered, fancied that Madame Souravieff's hand trembled slightly as she took this scrap of pasteboard from him ; but, however that may

have been, there was no tremulousness in her clear voice when she said, "Yes, show him in."

He was shown in accordingly: a slim, pale man, very carefully dressed, who, despite his English name, had much more of the appearance of a Russian than the lady who rose to greet him. His age might have been anything between thirty and forty. His fair hair was cut close to his head, after the foreign fashion, and had no parting; his moustache was waxed; his eyes were of so pale a blue as to be almost colourless; his face (and this was what made many people admire him) had absolutely no expression whatsoever. One cannot help admiring a man who can manage to look a perfect blank without looking in the least a fool.

"What a pretty house!" he exclaimed, glancing appreciatively round the room. "You look quite as if you lived here. But that is a way of yours. If you were planted in the middle of Siberia—as perhaps you may be some fine day—you would make yourself completely at home in a few hours."

Madame Souravieff made a slight grimace. "Is that all you have to say to me?" she asked.

"Oh no; I have so many things to say that the difficulty is to know where to start. Perhaps I had

better begin by expressing my surprise and delight at meeting you in England."

"That would be as good a way of beginning as another if it were not absurd. You are never surprised, Mark; and sometimes I think that you are never delighted. Of course I have very good reasons for being in England, and you know them all. For one thing, it is a free country."

"So they say; but to the best of my knowledge it is not a country in which one can do what one likes."

"At any rate it is a country in which one can say what one likes without being sent to prison."

"Yes—if that is an advantage. You will certainly obtain a good deal of sympathy, and possibly you may be able to collect a good deal of money, if you are careful to avoid specifying what you want it for. Setting politics aside, what motive have you for establishing yourself in Clarges Street?—if one may venture to ask."

"You ought not to require any answer to such a question," said Madame Souravieff.

Mr. Chetwode looked down at his neat little boots, and tapped them meditatively with his cane for a few seconds. "It is dangerous," he said, at length. One

may be watched in London just as well as anywhere else."

"At least we can meet here, and we could not meet at Vienna or Wiesbaden. Besides, what do I care? Let him watch and spy to his heart's content. He can never find out anything wrong about me, because there is nothing wrong to find out."

"It might perhaps be sufficient if he found out that I visited you constantly. I doubt whether he believes in my entire devotion to the cause of Panslavism."

"Nobody could believe easily in your devotion to any cause—or any person," returned Madame Souravieff, rather bitterly. "You almost make me regret that I did not take you at your word long ago and say farewell to you for ever. Most likely that is what you would have preferred. If you are weary of me, be honest and tell me so."

Mr. Chetwode raised his pale blue eyes and smiled faintly. "You know how long I have loved you, Olga," he replied. "I am not weary, I am only hopeless. And why should you compromise yourself by receiving me? It may get you into great trouble, and it can do no good to either of us. Do you know that when your note reached me I had serious thoughts of paying no

attention to it? If I were a rich man the case would be different; but, as far as I can make out, I am very nearly a ruined man. I can do nothing either for you or for your cause, and, really, your wisest plan would be to show me the door."

Madame Souravieff seemed to be a good deal touched by the words, which were coldly enough enunciated. "Poor Mark!" she exclaimed compassionately. "Has your journey been a failure, then? Are your affairs in a worse state than you expected?"

"Oh, I expected them to be in a bad state. For some years past I have had very little to live upon beyond the rent that I received for my house, and now my tenant has departed, and the lawyer tells me that I am not very likely to find a fresh one. He thinks the best thing I can do is to live there myself. It is a cheerful prospect."

"I can't imagine you living in an English province,' remarked Madame Souravieff, smiling a little at the idea. "What will you do with yourself? Who will your neighbours be?"

"It is not unlikely that I shall blow my brains out. I have not had the curiosity to inquire who will be my neighbours. The village clergyman, I suppose, and the

village doctor. Also a few native landowners—amongst others, the one who now owns the land which ought to be mine."

"I remember that you used to tell me about him. His name is Bligh, and he gained a lawsuit against you, because he was rich enough to bribe the judges. Was not that it?"

"Not exactly. In this country judges are irremovable, which, I am assured, renders them incorruptible. Nevertheless, a rich Englishman is more likely to win a lawsuit than a poor one, because he can go on applying to Superior Courts. I believe it was in that way that Mr. Bligh obtained a decision against my father, whose means were limited."

"Consequently, Mr. Bligh can hardly be counted as a neighbour."

"I do not precisely love him," replied Mr. Chetwode, with his slow, faint smile; "but if he sees fit to call upon me I shall return his visit. I hear, however, that he is a cripple; so he probably won't call upon me. Let us talk no more of my affairs, which are a most depressing topic of conversation. Tell me about yours. Has the date of the revolution been fixed yet?"

"What revolution?" inquired Madame Souravieff, quickly.

"I am so stupid! I can't at this moment recollect whether it was to take place in Servia or Bulgaria. However, the Vienna people know all about it; so that the persons interested have no doubt received full warning."

"You accuse me of doing dangerous things," observed Madame Souravieff; "don't you think that you yourself sometimes say them? When one has taken such engagements as you have done, one should be a little less reckless."

"I am discretion itself in ordinary company; but with you I feel sure that I am safe. The revolution has my best wishes; only I am rather sceptical as to its coming off, because, as I tell you, the secret is already an open one."

"Mark," exclaimed Madame Souravieff, striking her hands together impatiently, "you are a true Englishman; you have no heart!"

"And everybody here tells me that I am not in the least like an Englishman. They say it regretfully and apologetically, because, of course, it is such a very cruel thing to say of any one; yet they think I ought to

know it, in order that I may try to reform. As for my having no heart, that is a point upon which there can be no better judge than you. If you say that I have none, you are probably right."

Madame Souravieff made no rejoinder for some minutes. "And when do you propose to instal yourself in this remote château of yours?" she asked abruptly, at length.

"I thought of going down to-morrow or the next day."

"Although you know that I came here for—for——"

"For political objects, as I understood."

"Ah, yes; for political objects. I had better stick to them, no doubt. Good-bye then, Mark, since you are so anxious to say good-bye." And she held out her hand to him.

"You are rather unjust, Olga," said Mr. Chetwode, without rising. "If I were anxious to leave London immediately after your arrival, and on account of it, that would be for your sake, not for mine. The Count can do me no sort of harm; it wouldn't injure me in any way if he were to learn that I was in this house from morning to night. But he might injure you very materially by the simple expedient of declining to pay

your expenses any longer. You used to be fully alive to that risk."

"Do you mean to tell me that you are going away for my sake, then?"

"Oh no—although if I were able to stay in London I should endeavour to be circumspect for your sake. I am going away for the vulgar but sufficient reason that I can't afford to live here. The necessaries of life are cheap at Abbotsport I am told."

Madame Souravieff looked as if she were strongly tempted to make an offer which it has been agreed from time immemorial that no man who respects himself can accept. Probably knowledge of her visitor's character restrained her from doing so; for she only sighed, and said: "Abbotsport? Is there an hotel at Abbotsport?"

"Certainly not. I doubt whether there is even an inn: though there may be a few alehouses."

"Then I will tell you what I will do. When the London season is over, I will take your house. Will you let your house to me for a few months?"

"I shall be delighted; only in that case, you see, I should have to go away."

"Not necessarily. You could find accommodation in the neighbourhood, if you chose. Have you not an

intendant—a bailiff—what do you call him? Turn him out of his house for the time; it could easily be done. We must think it over and devise some plan. It is absurd that we should both be in England, yet unable to exchange a word."

"I suppose it is," said Mr. Chetwode, rising; "yet, perhaps, it is even more absurd that we should continue to meet. As I told you before, I am useless and ruined. One should never compromise oneself for a ruined and useless man."

"You are not useless, and I have not compromised myself," declared Madame Souravieff, warmly. "As for ruin, nobody is ever ruined except by his own fault. I want you to be great and powerful, and I think you will be some day. And I want to see you from time to time, because—well, you know why. Try to believe, Mark, that one may be ambitious without being heartless, and that love is not always selfish."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Chetwode, "I thought that was just what I was proving. The unselfishness of love, I mean. I know very little about ambition."

To look at him, one would have imagined that he knew quite as much about that passion as about the other; and, as a matter of fact, he was a man who had

always coveted power and had fretted under conditions which had made the attainment of any sort of distinction impossible to him. Born and brought up at St. Petersburg, where his father, after marrying a Russian lady, had settled permanently, he belonged to his mother's nation in habits and feelings, while remaining an Englishman in name. Thus he had been debarred from any career either in the land of his adoption or that of his origin, and when his parents died he had passed the age at which a fresh start can be made. They left him a moderate fortune, which he got rid of slowly, but steadily, over the card-tables at his club. He had amused himself to the best of his ability, but that was not very well, because, for his misfortune, amusements did not satisfy him. Of late years he had dabbled in political intrigues to an extent which had rendered his departure from St. Petersburg desirable, his chief reason for labouring in the cause of Panslavism being a desire to please Madame Souravieff, with whom he had fallen as much in love as a man of his temperament could. As he walked away from Clarges Street, with both his hands clasped behind his back, he said to himself that he was very tired of Panslavism and of the solemn mystery in which his fellow conspirators were

wont to shroud their proceedings. Perhaps he was also beginning to be a little tired of Madame Souravieff; but this he did not say to himself, because there are misgivings which it is always unwise to formulate, lest they should thus resolve themselves into unmistakable realities. For two years past Madame Souravieff had been everything to him: if he were now to lose the excitement by means of which she had been wont to make his somewhat sluggish blood run more quickly in his veins, he would have absolutely nothing left to live for. Life as an impoverished English country gentleman did not seem to him to offer any attractive possibilities: yet that was the kind of life which he had to face, and from which, so far as could be seen, no way of escape lay open to him. Thinking of this and of the forfeited income of certain lands, he forgot himself so far as to scandalize the crossing-sweeper in Berkeley Square by cursing the Bligh family aloud, root and branch.

CHAPTER V.

MARK'S LAWYER

Mr. Chetwode walked away from Madame Souravieff's door with his eyes bent down gloomily upon the pavement, and his mind absorbed in meditation upon subjects with which his immediate surroundings for the time being had nothing to do. He therefore failed to notice a plump, middle-aged, smooth-shaven man of foreign aspect, who was loitering on the opposite side of the street, and who witnessed his exit with an amused smile. This individual's smile expressed relief as well as amusement; because he had been walking up and down Clarges Street for a long time, and few duties are so fatiguing as that of mounting guard. However, he was being handsomely paid for his work, which is always a consolation, and he was earning his pay by strict attention to duty, which is a greater consolation still to the scrupulous mind. He glanced at his watch, sighed comfortably, and murmured: "Enough for one day!

Fifteen carriages, of which the greater part have coronets upon them; the society of London accepts Madame. No one is admitted until nearly six o'clock, when the suspected one presents himself. He enters, and emerges at the end of half an hour with the air of one who has wasted his time. But that is a detail which need not be mentioned in the report. If I am unable to watch the house continuously, that is due to no fault of mine, but to the habits of these English, who are not *flâneurs*. One cannot walk two or three times up and down a London street without making oneself conspicuous; although on this occasion I have been fortunate enough to escape notice."

He had not been so fortunate in this respect as he supposed, for while he had been thus meditating and biting the end off a very long cigar, Madame Souravieff, who had moved to the window, had caught sight of him.

"What insolence!" she exclaimed, and immediately rang the bell.

The grave butler who presently appeared in answer to this summons, was surprised and somewhat scandalized by the order which he received. "On the other side of the street there is a fat man who is lighting a

cigar. Run across and tell him to come here at once; I want to speak to him."

To suppose that a respectable English upper servant, who had lived in the very best families, would consent to "run" anywhere—and without his hat too—showed an ignorance of all propriety which could only be pardoned in a foreigner. The butler, of course, did no such thing; but he despatched a subordinate, who overtook the stout stranger and duly delivered the message.

The stout stranger did not look disconcerted. He smiled, glanced regretfully at his cigar, then carefully cut the lighted end off it and replaced it in his pocket. "I am at the orders of Madame la Comtesse," said he, in very fair English.

And indeed nothing could have been more respectful than the bow with which he greeted Madame Souravieff, when that lady swept down into the dining-room, where he had been requested to wait for her, and fixed a pair of angry eyes upon him. "What does this mean, Victor?" she asked in French.

The stout man shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands. "Madame la Comtesse," he replied, "must be aware that I have no choice but to do my duty and obey the orders that are given to me."

"Is it the duty of a valet to be a spy?" Madame Souravieff inquired.

"*Mon Dieu*, Madame, we may say that it is the duty of every poor man to lay by a little money in anticipation of his old age. When Monsieur le Comte commands me to proceed to London for a certain purpose, and not only pays all my expenses, but promises me three napoleons as well, in addition to my ordinary wages, I find myself in the impossibility of refusing. The more so because I am persuaded that I might remain here for months without making any revelation of importance."

"You may certainly count upon that," returned Madame Souravieff, disdainfully. "At the same time it is not agreeable to me to be watched, and I do not know why I should submit to such an insult."

"With permission, Madame la Comtesse, how can you help it? For the rest, one must admit, the Monsieur le Comte has reason to be disquieted. Monsieur desires to return to Russia as soon as his health may permit, and he is naturally anxious that he should not be coldly received at Court. It is said that Madame la Comtesse is pursuing a policy which is not that of His Majesty the Czar."

"Ah, bah! You were not sent here to report upon matters of policy, my good Victor. My political objects, of which I make no secret, are well known to Monsieur le Comte, and are, perhaps, less objectionable to His Majesty than is pretended. What is hoped for is that you may furnish evidence which will be instrumental in bringing about a divorce; but such evidence you never will be able to give, unless you perjure yourself. And you know that as well as anybody."

The valet replied that Madame la Comtesse was a thousand times right. Nevertheless, she would understand that he must make his report.

"No doubt. Report then all that you have seen and all that you have not seen. You may even give a report of this interview, if you choose. I have nothing to conceal."

The man smiled deferentially. "Am I to say that Mr. Chetwode was here this afternoon, and that he was the only person whom Madame deigned to admit?" he inquired.

"I have already told you that you are at liberty to report anything and everything, true or untrue."

"I only ventured to ask the question, because I feared that it might not be agreeable to Madame la

Comtesse to be summoned back to Germany. Have I permission to mention Monsieur's instructions to me?"

Madame Souravieff nodded.

"He said—I beg pardon for repeating such words—he said, 'I will not be disgraced. If you find that she has gone to England in order to meet Mr. Chetwode you will let me know, and I will at once cease remitting money to her. Detestable'—I quote him textually—'detestable though her company is to me, I prefer even that to being made a laughing-stock.'"

Now Madame Souravieff did not mind being told that her company was detestable to her husband, because she knew that it was so, and had, indeed, always endeavoured to make it so; but she had no private fortune, and to be recalled from London to the German baths at which her husband was then sojourning would not have suited her at all. Therefore, without any superfluous delicacy, she drew her purse from her pocket and handed a couple of bank-notes to her interlocutor, to whom she observed briefly: "You have not seen Mr. Chetwode."

The valet took the notes and bowed profoundly. "I am convinced of it," said he. "There was a gentleman somewhat resembling Mr. Chetwode who entered the

house a short time ago; but I could not be sure of recognizing him, and now that Madame la Comtesse tells me that it was not he, all doubt is at an end. For the rest, Madame la Comtesse knows that I am, as ever, devoted to her interests. If I can be in any way useful——"

Madame Souravieff, who during this colloquy had been standing beside the dining-table, drummed upon it for a few seconds with her white fingers, while she looked over the man's head. "And Monsieur's health?" she asked abruptly, at length.

"Excellent, Madame. A little gout—a little indigestion—which are yielding to the action of the waters. Monsieur counts upon returning to St. Petersburg before the winter."

"Well," said Madame Souravieff, with an impatient sigh, "you can go now. I am sure that I may rely upon your fidelity, because it must be delightful to be paid both for saying things and for leaving them unsaid. Besides, you are now in my power. In the event of any unpleasantness arising, I should not hesitate for a moment to tell Monsieur that I had bribed you, and he would certainly believe me."

When Madame Souravieff was left alone, she began

to laugh. She had a low, musical laugh, which was rightly considered to be one of her charms. "I was perhaps too quick," she murmured; "whatever Boris may have said, he is not likely to have said that. He would rather be despised than worried. Yet he is so malicious that he might be capable of putting up with my society if he knew how very much I should hate to leave England just now. After all, the best way is to pay Victor, and it is amusing to think that Boris provides the money. At this she laughed again; for she had a certain mischievous, childish sense of humour, which also was one of her charms.

However, she became grave and pensive while her maid was bedecking her for the dinner-party which she had promised to attend, and at which she expected to meet some eminent politicians. She was a woman of the world, whose worldliness was tempered by a large admixture of enthusiasm and romance. Of human nature in the abstract she had formed a tolerably accurate estimate, having had sufficient opportunity of so doing: but it was not in her power to apply this estimate to individuals, and thus she was unfitted for success either in public or in private life. Loving Mark Chetwode as she did, with a perfectly disinterested love,

she was obliged to clothe him in her thoughts with attributes which her reason told her that he did not possess; so that the memory of what he had said and done often gave her some anxious moments. Her temperament, however, was so far a fortunate and happy one, that if anything worried her she could almost always stop thinking about it; and she ceased to think about Mark very soon after she had seated herself in her carriage, and was being driven at a sharp trot towards Berkeley Square, where Lord Queensferry, with whom she had been invited to dine, resided.

Lord Queensferry was a man of over forty, who still looked young, and was always spoken of as being so. He was a Whig, and liked to be called a Radical; he was a sportsman, though scarcely a keen one; and he had made some smart speeches both in the House of Lords and upon the platform. Possibly he might never have risen to Cabinet rank if he had not been so very rich; but whatever the reason of it may have been, he had held high offices, and was sure to hold them again some day. At present he was in Opposition, which left him free to amuse himself and others by delivering inflammatory harangues every now and then, by consorting

with queer people, and by asking Madame Souravieff to dinner.

That lady on being shown into the great drawing-room at Queensferry House, met with a very cordial reception from her host and hostess, and found herself in highly distinguished company. The guests were not numerous, but they were celebrated, and Madame Souravieff had not been three minutes in the room before she perceived that she herself was, for the time being, the chief celebrity amongst them. They all looked at her, they were all anxious to be introduced to her, and it was evident that they all thought her a remarkably handsome woman. This pleased her immensely, for she loved admiration, and delighted in being recognized as a factor in contemporary politics. But she knew better than to begin talking of politics at once. While dinner was going on she contented herself with asking many questions about English life and manners, and confessing to a strong affection for English people.

"I should like to be an Englishwoman," she remarked ingenuously, during a pause in the general conversation; "but since that cannot be, I must try to be a good Russian. It is perhaps the next best thing."

Everybody thought her very nice and very clever, and in truth she managed to say some clever things in an unaffected way. She was, at all events, clever enough to know that English people are easily bored, and that nothing bores them quite so much as enthusiasm in private life. Therefore she kept a curb upon herself until her opportunity arrived.

This was soon after dinner, when the venerable statesman whose countenance and support she specially coveted approached her and seated himself upon the sofa by her side. He crossed his legs, folded his hands, smiled benignly, and said: "Now, Madame Souravieff, you must tell me all about Bulgaria."

"Ah," she replied, "what can I tell you that you do not already know? You are one of those marvellous people who know everything."

The great man looked pleased, although he felt bound to disclaim the omniscience ascribed to him. When he was out of office he was compelled, he said, to derive his information from the newspapers, like the rest of the public, and such information was not always to be relied upon.

"Oh, the newspapers!" exclaimed Madame Souravieff, with a disdainful shrug of her shoulders. "I have

always been accustomed to read the English newspapers, and since I have been in London I have done so with additional interest. They are very nicely printed —one must render them that justice—but I have often been obliged to rub my eyes in order to convince myself that the words which I seemed to see were actually there. The way in which they treat General Kaulbars, the most charming, the most inoffensive, the most placable man in the world, is enough to make any one doubt their good faith. Yet I really believe that they are honest. The English people are no doubt stupid and easily taken in, but they are honest, and that is why I love them."

"We are certainly honest," said the statesman.

"Nevertheless you are, if I may be allowed to say so, curiously prejudiced. Your one idea is that Russia wants Constantinople and must be kept out of it. You will not believe that Bulgaria is in the hands of a gang of adventurers, and that the heart of the people is—as indeed it must be—with us. You can't, or you won't, understand that it is we who have given freedom to Bulgaria, that the Bulgarians are our brothers by race and by creed, and that there is such a thing as gratitude even in politics."

"We may admit all that and yet not wish to see you at Constantinople, Madame Souravieff."

"But can you prevent us from going there eventually? Have you any alternative policy? I am only a woman, I have no pretensions to statecraft; still I can see that right is might, not might right. It is a conflict between Christianity and infidelity, and though Europe may choose to take the losing side and to close her eyes, and may retard the inevitable for many years to come, yet at last Christianity must conquer, as it always has conquered. The Cross will be raised again upon the dome of St. Sophia—I am as certain of it as I am of my own existence—the only question is whether this shall be done with or against the will of Christendom."

She spoke with a great deal of animation, and perhaps her beauty and her earnestness may have impressed her auditor, who remarked, "I, at least, shall hardly be accused of entertaining any sentiments of tenderness for the Turks."

"Nor for us either, I am afraid. Ah, if you only understood us and would trust us! There are but two great races in the world, the Anglo-Saxon and the Slav. Let them be friends, instead of enemies,

and the peace and happiness of mankind is assured. Is it too much to hope for such an understanding?"

Whether this was or was not an extravagantly sanguine expectation, she was encouraged to enlarge upon it, and the succeeding half-hour was made extremely pleasant to her. By the end of that time the room was full of people, for Lady Queensferry was holding a great reception, to which she had invited every man and woman whose name appeared in her visiting-book. Amongst them were many persons who wished to be recognized by Madame Souravieff's interlocutor, and amongst them, too, was a certain obscure (comparatively obscure) solicitor who, for reasons of his own, was anxious to make Madame Souravieff's acquaintance.

He attained his object without any difficulty, and she smiled with her usual graciousness when the little chubby, grey-headed man, who was introduced to her as "Mr. Wingfield," drew his heels together and made her a profound bow, though she wondered who Mr. Wingfield might be and what he could have to say to her.

He had plenty to say to her about political matters, and was much less reserved than the great

statesman had been. He quite saw the force of all her arguments; he professed himself a Liberal—a moderate Liberal—and was willing to allow that the British public might have been wholly misled as to the state of affairs in the Balkan provinces. But of course she understood perfectly well that he only reached his point when he remarked casually: "A great friend and client of mine, who, I believe, is also a friend of yours, is deeply interested in the Eastern question. I mean poor young Chetwode."

"Why do you call him poor?" Madame Souravieff inquired.

"Because, unfortunately, he is very poor indeed. He seems to have spent nearly the whole of his fortune —whether in support of revolutionary committees or not, of course, I can't say—and the income arising from the small extent of property which still remains to him in this country can hardly do more than keep the big house which stands upon it in repair."

"He was defrauded of a part of his property by a neighbour of his, was he not?" asked Madame Souravieff.

The lawyer laughed.

"Oh, well, his father used to say so, and I believe

he himself has some such idea. As a matter of fact, old Mr. Bligh, the father of Mark's present neighbour, held mortgages and foreclosed. Old Mr. Bligh may not have been very friendly or forbearing; but he was certainly within his right. However, the transfer of the land has left a great deal of bitter feeling, which is to be regretted. In your wide experience you must have met with many queer types of humanity, Madame Souravieff: did you ever happen to come across a romantic lawyer before?"

"Frequently," answered Madame Souravieff, smiling. "Why not?"

"Well, perhaps they are more common in Russia than they are in England. Anyhow, I have always regarded myself as singular in that respect. It is an amiable weakness which I can't help, and which, after all, harms nobody. Lately I have been beguiling my leisure moments by constructing a romantic plot, of which Mark Chetwode is the hero and Mr. Bligh's only daughter the heroine. I must tell you that Mr. Bligh is a very rich man, and that his daughter will certainly inherit a considerable fortune from him, if she does not inherit the whole of his landed property."

"Is she pretty?" asked Madame Souravieff, quickly.

"I believe she is not plain," said the astute solicitor; "but one must not be too exacting in such cases."

He looked sharply, as he spoke, at the Russian lady, who preserved an unruffled exterior. "I hope," said she musingly, "that your romance may become a reality. It would be a very good thing."

"Yes, yes," returned Mr. Wingfield, nodding his head; "it would be a good thing. A good thing for Mark, and, perhaps, not a very bad thing for the revolutionary committees."

"Oh, I know nothing about revolutionary committees," Madame Souravieff declared; "it is only from the newspapers that I hear of their existence. Still, there is no cause in the world that can be kept going without funds, and you are quite right in guessing that Mr. Chetwode will be more valuable to us as a rich man than as an impoverished one."

She turned away with a little nod of dismissal, leaving Mr. Wingfield in some doubt as to whether she would prove to be an ally or an opponent of his. "But I am pretty sure of one thing," he reflected; "I am pretty sure that Mark wants to be rid of her."

CHAPTER VI.

ARCHIE GOES OUT FISHING

"LOWNDES brought me a bit of news this morning," remarked Mr. Bligh, addressing the four persons who were seated at luncheon round the oval table.

"I know what it is," exclaimed Miss Skipwith, excitedly; "I have been expecting it for weeks past. The Bishop has forbidden him to use the eastward position, and I must say that I think the Bishop is perfectly right. I do hope Mr. Lowndes will not be so silly as to go on defying the law."

"Oh, I fancy he will," answered her brother-in-law, placidly. "The Bishop hasn't been so silly—or so wise, which is it?—as you imagine. Lowndes's news was of a less important kind. It is only that young Mark Chetwode is coming home."

"Coming to live at Upton Chetwode, do you mean?" asked Cicely eagerly. "I call that very important indeed. Is he really going to settle there,

or is he only coming down until he can find another tenant?"

"That Lowndes didn't know," answered Mr. Bligh. "Probably Chetwode would be glad to let the place again if he could; but it isn't very lettable, and he can't afford to leave it empty. The chances are that he will have to occupy it himself for a good many years to come."

"Poor devil!" ejaculated Morton, compassionately.

"You wouldn't like to be situated as he is, would you?" asked his father, with a smile.

The heir-apparent took some trouble to make his meaning clear. Certainly he would not care to be in Mark Chetwode's shoes, because, in his opinion, nothing could be more wretched than to live in a large house surrounded by lands which had passed away from one's family, and to be reminded at every turn that one represented a worn-out, poverty-stricken race. He did not in the least believe that the day of territorial influence and usefulness had gone by; only landowners who depended for an income on their land were now an anachronism. They couldn't live upon such an income, much less help others out of it. "Look at this property, for instance," he added. "It is a well-managed property.

I believe ; but if it were mine I would much rather sell it at once than attempt to keep things going upon the rents that I could squeeze out of my tenants."

"I trust that you will never be reduced to so painful a necessity," said Mr. Bligh, with such a slight twinkle in his eyes that nobody noticed it.

"I remember that I used to hear vague rumours about the Chetwodes when I was a boy," remarked Archie. "The Abbotsport people shook their heads over them, and doubted whether they weren't traitors to their Queen and country. Didn't they stay in Russia all through the Crimean War?"

"I believe so," answered Mr. Bligh ; "but as Mark was not born at that time we must not hold him responsible. I daresay you recollect old Mr. and Mrs. Morant, who lived at Upton Chetwode for many years. They are both dead now, and I suppose it isn't easy to find anybody who would care to take such a large house, with nothing attached to it beyond the park and a few acres of woodland."

"There are pheasants in the woods," said Cicely, "and there might be many more at the cost of a little money and trouble. Upton Chetwode is a dear old place, which must not be allowed to fall into ruins. I

shall seize the first opportunity of telling Mr. Chetwode that it is his duty to take up his abode there."

"You have such a convincing way of putting things, my dear," observed her father, "that I am quite sure he would see his duty at once, if only a chance of pointing it out to him were given you. Unfortunately, there is very little prospect of your getting that chance, because I am afraid he has been taught to regard us as hereditary enemies."

"Oh, but he must not be so ridiculous," Cicely declared, decisively. "Old Mr. Wingfield told me all about that when he was down here last year, and he himself said that it was perfect nonsense. The Chetwodes couldn't have kept their property in any case; and they ought to be thankful that it wasn't grabbed by some horrid old Jew or other. Besides, if ever he has money enough to buy it back I am sure we shall be delighted to let him have it."

"Shall we, indeed?" said Mr. Bligh, laughing. "I was not aware of that; but since you say so no doubt it is so."

Morton glanced at his sister from beneath his lowered eyelids, and remarked: "Little girls shouldn't be so cock-sure of other people's intentions."

This brought about an uncomfortable period of silence, soon after which the company dispersed. Mr. Bligh was wheeled away to the library; Miss Skipwith, murmuring something about having letters to write, fluttered after him towards the sitting-room which was appropriated to her especial use; and Morton, with a cigar in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, made for the smoking-room.

"How long," asked Archie, when he was left alone with his cousin, "do you suppose that your dear brother means to stay here?"

She shook her head rather despondently. "I think he is very tired of us," she replied, "but then, unhappily, we have not been able to conceal our desire for his departure. Perhaps if we all went down on our knees and implored him to remain with us he might fly."

Archie did not seem disposed to treat the matter in so light a spirit. "The man is simply intolerable!" he declared. "I have put up with him for three days, and in spite of great provocation I have behaved to him, I really must say, like an angel—for your sake."

"Thank you," said Cicely, with a little bow.

"Well, you asked me to be civil to him, you know.

But I don't think I can stand his perpetual impertinence to you much longer."

"If I can stand it I should think you might. I really don't mind what you call his impertinence; the only thing that distresses me is that I am afraid his being in the house worries my father. However, it can't be helped, and there's no use in talking about it. What are you going to do this afternoon? Would you like to be taken out fishing with me and Bobby Dare? Bobby wrote to me this morning to say that he had hired a boat of old Coppard (who, by the way, must have borrowed it, for he hasn't one of his own), and it would be an act of charity if we were to make use of it."

"Of charity to Dare or to Mr. Coppard?" inquired Archie.

"Well, to both, perhaps," answered the girl, laughing. "Besides, it might help to amuse you—which is more to the purpose."

Archie was not quite sure that it would amuse him to put out to sea; because the wind was in the east, and, as everybody knows, the wind cannot blow from that quarter in the English Channel, be it never so softly, without raising a long swell, which is apt to be disconcerting to landsmen. But he was not going to miss the

chance of spending several hours in Cicely's society; still less was he inclined to leave her for several hours in the society of Bobby Dare.

Presently, therefore, the two young people set forth for the village, and Morton, who espied them from the smoking-room window, muttered: "Hang the fellow! he ought to be ashamed of himself. If he had the feelings of a gentleman he would understand that he has no alternative but to clear out and not show his face here again until a certain event has taken place. He may come back then, and welcome."

But Archie was free from any of the scruples which, according to this rigid moralist, ought to have disturbed him, because—incredible though that would have seemed to the rigid moralist—he was free from any suspicion of their appropriateness. He adored Cicely, and that was all that he thought about in connection with her. He did not believe his uncle to be dying; he had never asked himself what would happen when his uncle died, or supposed that it was in contemplation to put him in Morton's place. All his life he had had a sufficiency of money, and the idea of being wealthy would not have been especially attractive to him, even if it had entered his head. What chiefly preoccupied him just

now was an uneasy feeling of jealousy of Bobby Dare, which, as almost anybody could have told him, was a perfectly absurd sentiment to harbour. It was well known in the neighbourhood of Abbotsport that Miss Bligh held her head very high indeed, and that there was little likelihood of her throwing herself away upon the younger son of a baronet whose rent roll, probably, did not exceed four thousand pounds a year. But the Abbotsport estimate of Miss Bligh was unknown to Archie; nor, perhaps, had it been revealed to him, would he have recognized its accuracy.

"What sort of a chap has Dare developed into?" he asked her while they were walking at a brisk pace across the park; and when she replied, carelessly, "Oh, rather a nice, manly boy," he felt reassured. He himself had not yet passed the age of those—*fortunatos nimium*—who can't hear themselves described as boys without considering that they have been insulted; so he was quite prepared to extend the hand of tolerant good-fellowship to his old acquaintance, Lieutenant Dare, R.N., who had been walking impatiently up and down the jetty for a good half-hour before the arrival of Cicely and her escort.

Bobby Dare, for his part, was not precisely overjoyed

to see the young Lancer, for whose appearance he had not been prepared; but as he was a thoroughly kind-hearted and good-natured little fellow, he said everything that was polite, and was even considerate enough to mention that there was a bit of a lop outside.

"I know Miss Bligh doesn't care," he said, "she's as good a sailor as I am. But there are a good many people who cannot stand an easterly swell."

Archie at once gave it to be understood that he was not one of the unfortunates alluded to; and from the bottom of his heart he hoped he was not. At all events he would have died rather than retreat at the eleventh hour, and he seated himself in the boat with a grim determination that if by any means the mind could be made to dominate the body he would not disgrace himself.

Now there is no doubt but that the mind can dominate the body to a certain extent and within certain limits. Any ordinary person, by putting forth the full strength of his will, may keep himself for a time from fainting or from being sea-sick; but even an extraordinary person is bound to be vanquished at length. In the former case the colours have to be

hauled down when everything becomes black; in the latter defeat is indicated by symptoms upon which it is needless to dwell. Archie was well acquainted with them, and was thankful that he did not experience them during the first half-hour that he spent on board the *Rover*. Nevertheless, he was not altogether happy. There was very little wind, but the ebbing tide was raising a nasty cross sea, over which the boat plunged and rolled uncomfortably; he was afraid that he was looking rather green, and he felt incapable of keeping up conversation. Over the side he was dangling a line with which old Coppard had provided him; although nobody knew better than old Coppard that there was not the remotest prospect of any fish being caught under existing circumstances. But after all, fishing of that kind is never a very exciting form of sport, and in truth neither Bobby Dare nor Cicely cared a straw whether they were successful or not. Cicely was enjoying herself. She loved the sea; perhaps, too, she did not dislike the humble worship of her neighbour, who, with the tiller under his arm, was looking unspeakable things at her. She ignored the unspeakable things, but listened willingly to those which were spoken, and displayed a kindly interest in

what Bobby told her about his prospects. He had been through a course of gunnery instruction; he hoped soon to be afloat again; he confessed that he did not care much about a prolonged leave, and said, with something of a sigh, that his profession was all he had to live for. His wooing could hardly be called a wooing, because it started with the assumption that there was no hope for him (which is a very fatal assumption to start with); yet he obtained a measure of compassion and gratitude which his rival noted with vexation. It was not pleasant to hear Cicely saying that if she had been a man she would certainly have been a sailor; it was still less pleasant to catch fragments of confidential communications about her brother, which she thought fit to make to one who was in no way concerned with her family affairs; and what was worst of all was to be treated as non-existent. Archie was not accustomed to be so treated; he did not appreciate the delicacy which deterred his cousin from looking at him or addressing him; and so, as time went on, his physical uneasiness became complicated by a sharp attack of jealousy and ill-temper.

Meanwhile, Coppard, who had been sitting in the bows, with his elbows on his knees, and had been keeping

very quiet (for he was not sure whether Miss Cicely had forgiven him yet) was also growing uneasy. Coppard knew that the wind was shifting—had, indeed, already shifted a point or two to the southward. Furthermore, he knew that it was going to blow, and had private misgivings which he felt bound at last to express.

"What should you say to gettin' about, sir?" he asked, deferentially. "'Tis working up rather ugly to the west'ard, and we may get more of it than we want presently."

Bobby rose and took a quick survey of the horizon. "Yes, there's a change of weather coming," he agreed, "but I expect we shall be all right until after sunset. What do you think, Miss Bligh? Do you want to go back?"

Cicely did not want to go back, but she did think that the sky looked threatening. After a momentary hesitation, she referred the question to her cousin. "Have you had enough of it, Archie?"

Thereupon Mr. Coppard was ill-advised and ill-mannered enough to chuckle. "More'n enough, Miss, you may depend!" answered he, before Archie could open his lips. Then it was that Archie was impelled

to declare promptly and mendaciously that for his part he didn't care if they stayed out till midnight. Now this, little as he supposed it, was by no means an impossible contingency. The south-west wind defied precedent, as it sometimes will, by rising, first in puffs, then with steadily increasing force, a good hour before its proper time, and soon the *Rover* was running before it towards Abbotsport without any certainty of being able to make that haven. The harbour, it is true, was protected by a breakwater, which Mr. Bligh had caused to be constructed, but then this breakwater had for years past been causing the gradual formation of a bar, and under certain conditions of tide and wind this bar was an obstacle which had to be taken into account."

"I doubt we sha'n't do it, sir," said Coppard to the man at the helm.

"Oh, we shall do it right enough," returned the latter, who had himself been peering somewhat anxiously across the curling waves ahead; "there ought to be plenty of water."

"So there did, sir; you never spoke a truer word. But maybe there ain't, you see. 'Tis nigh upon low water now, and the sea setting straight in."

"Well, but what are we to do if we can't cross the bar, Coppard?" Cicely inquired.

Coppard had to confess that in that case there would be nothing for it but to stand out to sea again and await the turn of the tide. This, he hastened to add, would involve no sort of risk; the *Rover* would make nothing of far worse weather than they were likely to see that evening. Only, to be sure, they might get a wetting.

"Hang it all, man!" exclaimed Archie, with a sudden outburst of irritation, "if you knew there was going to be any difficulty about getting into harbour, why did you keep us out so long? I suppose the fact is that you're paid by time."

He might have brought many more injurious accusations without giving half so much offence. The only excuse for him was that he was afraid neither Cicely nor Bobby would much mind being exposed to the buffeting of the waves for another two or three hours, whereas he knew for certain that he himself must very shortly collapse.

Coppard behaved extremely well. For a moment he scowled angrily at the young man, but he controlled himself and only answered: "I'll take 'ee in, sir, if so

be as it can be done. I don't want Miss Cicely to be put to no inconvenience."

So they kept on their course, while a little group of persons who were watching them from the jetty hoped that they might be in time, but had doubts about it.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE ALIEN

"YOUR view, then," said Mark Chetwode, "is that I must grin and bear it?"

He was sitting in the City office of Mr. Wingfield, whither he had betaken himself in order to consult his family solicitor about certain matters of business, the discussion of which had gradually led to a topic very near his heart—that, namely, of the transfer of a part of his hereditary possessions to Mr. Bligh.

"My dear sir," answered the little lawyer, folding his hands and smiling amiably, "what other view could a sensible being take? Nobody asks you to grin, but as for bearing it—well, I suppose we must all bear what can't be helped. Your poor father, I know, persisted in thinking that he had been defrauded, but that, if I may be allowed to say so, was very great nonsense. He mortgaged his land, he was unable for a considerable time to pay the interest due, and then the

mortgagee foreclosed. You may be as angry as you please with the mortgagee, but I really don't see how you can imagine that you have any legal claim against him. For the matter of that, I confess that I don't see much sense in being angry with him either."

Mark Chetwode stroked his moustache and fixed his colourless eyes upon Mr. Wingfield. "I am very seldom angry," said he; "only I should have thought that in this country, where justice is supposed to reign supreme, a man would have been allowed some chance of redeeming his own. My father, as you know, could have done that, if time had been given him."

"Your theory," observed the lawyer, with a smile, "favours an insecurity of title which would hardly be to the public advantage. Not that it matters much. Your father, you say, could have freed the estate; but could you do so?"

"No, because I have been a fool, and have squandered my patrimony. That, however, does not prevent me from regarding Mr. Bligh as a licensed robber. I am unreasonable, if you choose, but that is how I feel."

"Well now," said the lawyer, persuasively, "I wouldn't feel in that way about it if I were you; I wouldn't really. It's a little bit absurd, you know, and

I am sure that you are no lover of absurdity. You have a fancy—a very natural and very creditable fancy—for recovering the land which once belonged to your family. But there are more ways than one of doing that. Or, to be strictly accurate, there is only one way; and I should think that it would be by no means an unpleasant one. Mr. Bligh, who won't live much longer, has a daughter; and from all that I hear his daughter has an excellent chance of being his heiress."

"He has a son, too, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but his son is a black sheep. Not an ordinary black sheep, who might be expected to turn more or less white on acquiring wealth and responsibility, but one of a deep and permanent dye. Morton Bligh has advertised himself, too, as a Radical. Also he is a free-thinker, who has translated the freedom of his thoughts into action after a fashion which shows that he has the courage of his opinions. There is no saying what mischief a fellow like that might not work in such a place as Abbotsport, where feudal traditions still linger. His father, who is a conscientious Tory, is afraid of his son and would like to disinherit him. He is not fond of his son and he adores his daughter. His present

scheme, if I am correctly informed, is to disinherit the son in favour of the daughter, always supposing he can get the daughter to marry a nephew of his, a subaltern in a cavalry regiment. But the young lady is said to be self-willed; and for my own part I should imagine that a young lady's first cousin would always start rather heavily handicapped."

"Oh, I see. You would advise me to enter myself against the subaltern?"

"Why not? It would be an honourable and satisfactory method of attaining your object."

Mark Chetwode laughed. He had a singularly dreary laugh.

"I am much obliged to you," he said, "but there are reasons which I am afraid would make it impossible for me to adopt your suggestion."

Mr. Wingfield knew a great deal better than to inquire what those reasons might be. He only remarked, after a pause, during which he had glanced at some of the letters which were lying upon his table: "By the way, I met your friend, Madame Souravieff, at Lord Queensferry's the other night. Lord Queensferry, who is a client of mine, asks me to his big crushes, and in that way I get occasional glimpses of celebrities.

Madame Souravieff is a celebrity, isn't she? Anyhow, she is a very clever woman."

"Did you think so?" returned Mark, languidly. "What did she talk about to you?"

"Oh, not much about politics; she probably understood that my political opinions were of no great importance to anybody. I think we talked more about you than about anything else. And she quite agreed with me that you could not do better than marry Miss Bligh." Mr. Wingfield, as he made this assertion, peeped from under his eyelids at his visitor, whose impassive countenance did not change. The lawyer, however, was a close observer, and he thought that he detected an almost imperceptible movement, which could not be called a start, yet might be taken as an equivalent to one, on the part of the younger man.

Mark said: "That was generous of her, because she doesn't as a rule like her friends to marry."

The subject was not pursued further, and soon afterwards he took his leave. He walked meditatively for some distance down the street, and the upshot of his meditations was that he said to himself, "I don't believe it." As a matter of fact he seldom believed in anybody or anything, experience having convinced him

that most things and people are false. Still it seemed worth while to proceed to Clarges Street with a view to making investigations; so he hailed a hansom and had himself driven to Madame Souravieff's door.

That lady was at home and was glad to see him, or at all events professed to be so.

"I didn't expect you to-day," she said; "you told me you wouldn't be able to come."

"I didn't think I should be able to come," he said; "I had to go and hold a conference with my old solicitor, Mr. Wingfield, and I imagined that he would detain me longer than he did. As it happened, our conference was brief and unsatisfactory. He assured me that I had nothing at all to complain about, that the property which was once ours now belonged quite legitimately to Mr. Bligh, and that if I wanted to get it back again I had better begin paying my addresses to Mr. Bligh's daughter, who, it seems, is not unlikely to be his successor before long."

Madame Souravieff nodded. "Yes, that is what he said to me," she observed. "Did he tell you that we had met at Lord Queensferry's?"

"He did, and he added that you approved of this scheme. I had just a shade of difficulty in believing him."

A very slow and faint flush overspread Madame Souravieff's cheeks. She looked down at the carpet, which she was tapping softly with her foot. Her feet were small and well shaped, and her shoes always fitted perfectly.

"Do you consider me a selfish woman?" she asked, raising her eyes suddenly.

"I do not pretend to understand women," Mark replied. "All I am sure about in dealing with them is that one can never be sure of them."

It was not a very polite speech, but it did not seem to displease Madame Souravieff, who smiled. "Actually a little suspicion of jealousy?" she asked, with lifted eyebrows.

"At the risk of seeming unpardonably vain, I must own that I did not think you would wish me to marry."

He looked piqued, and the truth was that he felt so, although he was more than half conscious of longing for a release which only Madame Souravieff could give him.

How far she read his thought is uncertain, for the benefit of a doubt is what no human being has ever been able to refuse to him or herself. But she said gently:

"I think you are right; I think you don't understand women. When we love we love less selfishly than you do. We are wise or foolish; it doesn't matter, because we can't help ourselves; we are made like that. I want you to be happy, I want you to be rich, and I know you well enough to know that you can never be happy unless you are rich." She added with a deep sigh: "And the Count will live for ever. He will always have the gout; but that will not prevent him from hobbling after my coffin when I am laid in my grave. He will make a point of being at the ceremony; he is a great stickler for etiquette, as you know."

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "You really desire then that I should raise another barrier between us?"

"My friend, when we have already a stone wall between us which we cannot climb, it signifies very little whether you erect a second one beyond it or not. If there were any hope—but there is no hope! Marry your heiress; it is not I who shall forbid you. Only," she added, with an abrupt laugh, which had a certain ring of fierceness in it, "do not permit yourself to fall in love with her."

"I possess guarantees against that danger," said Mark.

He remained another half-hour with the woman whom he had once adored, and whom, perhaps, he still loved. She had many qualities which were easily enough understood, but she had others which were incomprehensible save to enthusiasts, and there never lived a less enthusiastic man than Mark Chetwode.

When they parted it was with the mutual knowledge that they would meet no more for some time to come. He was going to his long deserted home, and she was compelled, or thought herself compelled, to remain in London. But they were to write to one another frequently, and, when the season should be more advanced, perhaps she might carry out that plan of renting his house from him.

"In the meantime," were her last words, "try to make yourself very agreeable to the heiress. You can be very agreeable when you please; one must do you that justice."

"I suppose," said Mark, as he walked away, "that she is really unselfish. It is strange; but it seems to be the truth. After all, she has common sense on her side. It is time to conclude a romance which has no prospect of reaching any reasonable conclusion. Perhaps

that is what she means, though she doesn't like to say it in so many words."

As to Mr. Wingfield's project, in which she had acquiesced with such surprising readiness, he did not trouble himself to consider it seriously. He was not a vain man; he did not suppose—as they apparently did—that the heiress would be quite pleased to marry him if he did her the honour to propose to her; moreover, such a method of regaining the possessions of his forefathers would have been repugnant to him. Not that he had any sort of scruple about making a marriage of convenience, but he had been brought up to regard the Blighs as his enemies; he had been accustomed to hold them as in some undefined way responsible for the many failures of his life, and for his present impecunious condition. He hated the very sound of their name, and was convinced that he should hate them individually if ever he were brought into contact with them.

On the following day he reached Upton Chetwode, and saw for the first time the beautiful old house of which the exterior had been made familiar to him by photographs. It was undeniably a beautiful old house, dating almost throughout from the sixteenth century, standing as beautiful old houses so seldom do) upon a height›

surrounded by lawns and flower-beds, beyond which an expanse of fairly well-timbered park fell gradually away to the edge of the chalk cliffs. But it was scarcely an inviting or cheerful dwelling-place for a lonely man. The lawns were unmown; the flower-beds were bare; the gravel walks evidently had not been weeded for a very long time; the few rooms which had been opened for the reception of the owner were dark, gloomy, deserted-looking, and had a damp, musty smell. As Mark stood gazing out of one of the mullioned windows at his shrunken territory and at the prospect of grey sea and sky which was discernible in the waning light of a chill spring evening, he shuddered and murmured under his breath: "A garret in Paris would be better than this."

Dinner was served for him presently in the great silent dining-room, and a very bad dinner it was. He had engaged no servants; the old couple who, with their daughter, had been living in the house since the departure of the last tenant, would, he presumed, be capable of providing for his modest wants. His French valet waited upon him, and enlivened the proceedings from time to time by a heartrending sigh. All this was bad enough, but going to bed was a great deal

worse. It was a positive fact—for he ascertained it by inquiry—that there was not a single spring mattress in the whole house; so that there was nothing for it but to sleep, or attempt to sleep, upon a feather bed. And they had put him into the best bedroom, which was oak-panelled and of gigantic dimensions, and the bedstead itself was an appalling old four-poster. "Same as pore Mr. Morant died in," the old woman who had cooked the dinner informed him, by way of a recommendation.

Perhaps it was because he had spent such an extremely wretched night that the forlorn owner of Upton Chetwode was able to take a slightly more cheerful view of his demesne on the following morning. When one's spirits have reached the lowest attainable ebb, they must needs begin to flow again; besides, sunshine makes a difference in everything and everybody. He did not in the least believe that he could reside permanently in such a place, but he thought he might be able to put up with it for a time, and that by laying out a little money upon it (though where the money was to come from he couldn't imagine) he might render it attractive enough to tempt a tenant of retiring tastes; and he felt a certain languid curiosity to make acquaint-

ance with the details of English country life. It would at least be a new experience, if not a particularly exciting one. So he roamed over the house and the gardens, and had interviews with the few dependents whose services he had been compelled to retain, and he gave an order or two, and wrote some letters, and listened to a great many complaints, the nature of which he scarcely understood, and thus the day passed away more quickly than might have been anticipated. It was already evening when he set out to walk seawards, thinking that perhaps he would pursue his explorations as far as the village of Abbotsport, which, he had been given to understand, might be reached by a zigzag pathway cut in the face of the cliff.

Now it came to pass that while he was wandering along the confines of his domain in search of this path, he encountered a little old lady who was hurrying from another point of the compass towards the same destination, and who appeared to be much perturbed by the sight of him. She started, threw up her hands nervously and faltered out, "Oh, I'm afraid I'm trespassing."

Mark took off his hat. "You are very welcome, Madam," he replied, smiling.

In acknowledgment of this civility, the old lady made an antiquated bow, which was almost a curtsey. "I think," she said, "you must be Mr. Chetwode." And when he had admitted his identity she added, "We did not know that you were expected here so soon; otherwise, I should not have ventured to take this liberty. The truth is that I have been calling at the Rectory, and was on my way to the village. This is a short cut which poor Mr. Morant kindly gave us permission to use."

"You will confer a favour on me if you will continue to use it," Mark declared. "This neighbourhood does not appear to be densely populated, and I presume that the permission was not given to an unlimited number of persons."

"Oh, dear, no!" returned the old lady, looking a little shocked at such an idea. "We ourselves very seldom took advantage of it. This afternoon I was rather in a hurry to get to Abbotsport, because I was anxious about my niece, who has gone out sailing. The wind, you see, has changed, and Mr. Lowndes says we may expect a gale; and sometimes it is impossible for boats to enter the harbour. Oh, dear, what a pity it is that young people will be so careless and thoughtless!"

"I don't think we are going to have a gale," said Mark, to comfort her, though in truth he was no judge of such matters. "But I can quite understand your anxiety. I myself am bound for the village; perhaps you will kindly permit me to accompany you, and will show me the way."

Miss Skipwith thought him a very pleasant-mannered young man, and assented graciously; but when she told him who she was, a change came over his face which she could not help noticing.

"Oh," she exclaimed, breathlessly, "perhaps I ought to have mentioned my name before. I am afraid—but really that is a great mistake—that you think Mr. Bligh has taken your property from you?"

"I may be mistaken, but I was certainly under the impression that the property had passed into Mr. Bligh's hands," said Mark, with a rather grim smile.

"Yes, but then you know it was paid for; and besides, it was not Wilfrid but his father who foreclosed—if that is the right word to use. It does seem so sad and so unnecessary that there should be any bad feeling about it. Only the other day Cicely was saying that they would be delighted to let you buy the land back if you wished. Of course it isn't in her hands yet, and

perhaps never will be, but I am sure that neither she nor her father would ever be guilty of an unneighbourly action."

"Is Cicely your niece?" asked Mark, who was amused and a little touched by the communicativeness of the elderly stranger.

"Yes, and the dearest and best girl in the world, though a little too fond of her own way. But that is only what might have been expected. Poor Wilfrid being so ill and suffering, and that dreadful son of his always absent, a great deal has devolved upon Cicely which other girls of her age would naturally have been spared. Just now I am in a good deal of trouble and perplexity about her. But I must really apologize for speaking to you about family affairs, which of course can't interest you."

"They would interest me very much indeed if you would tell me about them," answered Mark, smothering an inclination to laugh. "Please go on."

CHAPTER VIII.

CICELY IS INTERESTED

Everybody who knew Miss Skipwith at all well agreed that she was a goose; and the general verdict was probably correct. Nevertheless, geese sometimes accomplish what wise persons might attempt in vain, and foolish old Miss Skipwith succeeded without any difficulty in breaking down the barrier of hostility which Mark Chetwode had conceived against all who dwelt at the Priory. She did not indeed persuade him that he had no grievance, but she conveyed to him the impression that the present holder of estates which had belonged for centuries to the Chetwode family was as innocent a sinner as Louis XVI., and she made him feel that his quarrel was rather with circumstances than with individuals. She interested him, too, by what she told him about her nephew and niece. She led the way down the zigzag path, talking volubly the whole time, and pausing every now and then to

glance over her shoulder, while she laid bare her simple hopes and fears.

Morton Bligh was a dreadful man—a man who had openly avowed his disbelief in revealed religion, and who had, besides, all his life long deliberately and persistently neglected the duties imposed upon him by birth. It would be a sad calamity for Abbotsport if ever Morton were to succeed his father.

"He cares nothing for the place. I doubt if he would ever live there. All he would do would be to exact every penny of rent that was due to him, and laugh if he were told that any of his tenants in the village were starving. With Cicely it would be very different; she loves the people and they love her. I don't say that she wouldn't make mistakes, because she is very young and headstrong, but at least her mistakes would be upon the right side."

"Possibly," said Mark, "Mr. Bligh may be aware of all this, and may dispose of his property accordingly."

Miss Skipwith sighed. "Of course he is aware of it," she answered, "but Wilfrid also is headstrong in his own way; nobody can dictate to him. He will do what he thinks right; and just now, I am afraid, he does not think it would be right to pass

over his son. Morton, knowing how ill his father is, has come down here to show how well he can behave. Unfortunately, he has few opportunities of behaving badly in a place such as this. Still, he is very rude and disagreeable: that, I suppose, he can't help being."

"I think," said Mark, smiling, "that the young lady's chances look promising."

"Ah, but there are complications. She has a cousin, an officer in a cavalry regiment, whom my brother-in-law has virtually adopted, and who is at present staying with us on leave. I daresay you can guess what *his* ambition is; and the worst of it is that Wilfrid is quite inclined to encourage him. Wilfrid is like most men; he can't believe that a woman can safely be entrusted with authority; and though he has never said so, I know perfectly well that nothing would please him more than to see Archie married to Cicely. Then, I think, he would probably make Archie his heir."

"And would that be such a very bad arrangement?"

"First-cousin marriages are always a bad arrangement," said Miss Skipwith, decisively; "but setting that aside, the arrangement would be bad because it would make Cicely unhappy. She has always been accustomed to rule; she wouldn't understand how to

play second fiddle. I would rather that she had to leave Abbotsport altogether than that she should remain here in a subordinate position. Added to which, I don't see why that young man should have everything his own way. It isn't as if he were worthy to tie Cicely's shoe-strings."

"What does she herself think about it?" Mark inquired. "In England that is always an important question, I believe."

Miss Skipwith replied that that was, no doubt, a very important question, but that she was unable to answer it. All she knew was that Cicely seemed to like being with him, and that they were together a great deal more than she, for her part, thought desirable or even proper. "But people's ideas have changed so much since I was young," she added, sorrowfully. "This very afternoon they have gone out in a boat together, which in former times would have been considered quite an impossible thing to do. To be sure they have a third person with them—a young Mr. Dare, who lives near this—but even so I can't think it right. And now if there is too much sea for them to get into the harbour they may be out half the night, for anything that we can do to prevent it."

It appeared, indeed, that Miss Skipwith was far more disquieted upon the score of propriety than upon that of physical risk; and this surprised her companion, because the nearer he drew to the sea the more he became aware that dirty weather was setting in. When they had passed down the steep, narrow street of the village and had reached the jetty, they found themselves in the midst of a group of experienced persons who were unanimously of opinion that the lugger, which could be seen running before the wind towards the harbour's mouth, was attempting a hazardous feat. It was now blowing something like half a gale, and the entrance of the harbour, which lay between the wooden jetty and the concrete breakwater, was marked by an ugly white line of foam where the waves curled and struck.

"Will they be able to get in?" asked Miss Skipwith anxiously of an ancient mariner in a sou'-wester.

"As much as they will, mum," answered the man. "You may say there is room, but you can't say no more. Oh, you ain't no call to be afeard, mum; they won't be drownded, though they might get a wetting. We'll get 'em ashore safe enough. But with the boat, you see, 'tis different. Once she gets upon that there bar she'll

go to pieces for certain. 'Tis wrong to make light of other men's property in that way, and Coppard ought to have known a deal better than to do such things."

"Oh, if that is all, I am sure Mr. Bligh will be only too happy to pay for the boat," Miss Skipwith declared confidently.

Meanwhile the lugger was approaching her destination at a great rate of speed. Presently, the forms and features of all those who were on board were clearly discernible. Bobby Dare, with the tiller in his hand, was standing up, his keen eyes fixed upon the water ahead; Coppard, holding the sheet, was ready to lower the sail at the word of command; and it is a pity that neither Miss Skipwith nor Mark Chetwode possessed knowledge enough of seamanship to appreciate a manœuvre which elicited murmurs of admiration from their better instructed neighbours. However, when once a thing has been done every one sees how easy it was to do it, and as soon as the *Rover* had been brought alongside of the landing-steps, her handiness obtained more praise than Mr. Dare's skill. "Told'ee so, mum," grunted the fisherman in the sou'-wester (who had done nothing of the sort). "Bless yer 'eart, with a craft like

that there a child could make this 'arbour at any tide and in any weather."

Miss Skipwith said, "Really? Well, I am very glad to hear it, I'm sure: it looks to me dreadfully dangerous."

She picked her way gingerly down the slippery steps, and began to administer one of the mild remonstrances to her niece which she ventured upon from time to time, much as a man across whose land a right of way has been established will close his gates once a year, in formal assertion of a privilege which has practically ceased to be his. "My dear Cicely," she exclaimed, "what a fright you have given us; you really should think a little more of what you are doing, and—and of other people's feelings. You, I daresay, would have thought it very good fun to be kept out at sea half through the night, but it would not have been at all good fun either for your father or for me to be left for hours in uncertainty as to whether you were alive or dead. I should have thought," added the old lady severely, "that Mr. Archibald might have remembered that, even if you forgot it."

When Miss Skipwith wished to be especially impressive it was her habit to speak of Archie as Mr.

Archibald. She was perhaps aware that the designation irritated him.

"Well, we haven't remained out half through the night, you see, Aunt Susan," said Cicely, composedly; "so that there is no occasion to blame anybody. At all events, it would be most unjust to blame poor Archie, because nobody could have been more anxious than he was to get into harbour again. In fact, he simply insisted upon our risking our lives to do it."

Having thus, as it were, fired right and left with effect, Miss Bligh proceeded to disembark. Declining the proffered assistance of her two admirers, she laid her hand for an instant upon the shoulder of old Coppard, who was clinging to the jetty with his boat-hook, and sprang lightly out on the steps. But the steps were overgrown with seaweed, and so it came to pass that this self-reliant young lady's foot slipped, and that she would have fallen ignobly upon her nose, but for a pair of arms which were opportunely stretched out to save her. These she instinctively clutched until she had recovered her balance, when she became aware that they belonged to a young man whom she had never seen before, and who took off his hat, which he held for a moment in his hand, instead of at once replacing it

after the English fashion. "I beg your pardon," he said.

"It is I who ought to beg yours," answered Cicely, laughing. "I wonder I didn't knock you down."

Cicely did not know the meaning of the word shyness. She was as much at her ease with a total stranger as with an intimate friend, and this was one of her idiosyncrasies which her aunt never quite knew whether to admire or to deprecate.

"Cicely, my dear," said the old lady, "let me introduce Mr. Chetwode, of whom you have often heard your father speak. Mr. Chetwode very kindly gave me permission to walk through his grounds just now."

The young man's hat was once more raised, while Cicely bestowed a little bow and a scrutinizing gaze upon him.

She was much interested in the owner of Upton Chetwode, and had felt no slight anxiety to see what manner of man he was. Her first impression—and, like all women, she attached great importance to first impressions—was decidedly favourable. Handsome, he could hardly be called; perhaps too, on closer inspection, his face was somewhat older than his figure; but

he had undoubtedly the appearance of a gentleman, and what was better still was, that he had not at all the appearance of an ordinary English gentleman. His colourless, expressionless face invited interrogation. All sorts of things might be hidden behind that seemingly impenetrable mask, which a young woman of inquiring bent might find amusement in calling forth. It is even possible that, without being aware of it, Miss Bligh may have been a trifle piqued by the absence of that tribute of frank admiration which she was accustomed to detect in the eyes of all men and to accept as her due.

"So you have come home at last," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I've come to my house," he replied. "At present I can't say that I feel very much at home there."

He spoke with just the faintest suspicion of a foreign accent, and Cicely noticed that his boots and gloves (had he any business to be wearing gloves at all?) were not of English make, although the rest of his costume was.

"Oh, but you must learn to feel at home here," she declared. "Aren't you proud of being an Englishman? You ought to be, you know."

"I will try to be as proud as I ought to be," he answered, gravely, "if you will kindly tell me the way to set about it. How should one begin?"

During the above interchange of remarks the whole party had been moving along the jetty, and it now occurred to Cicely that conversation might be carried on with less risk of interruption if one member of it were got rid of. Accordingly she turned round and extended her hand to the selected victim, saying, "Good-night, Bobby, and many thanks for the sail. Don't forget to give my love to your sisters."

"Oh, I'll walk part of the way home with you, if you don't mind," said poor Bobby, who was in no such hurry to be dismissed.

"But I do mind very much indeed; and Sir George will mind very much indeed if you are late for dinner. Do you know what time it is? You will only just save yourself, even if you run."

Now Sir George Dare, who never waited dinner for anybody, would assuredly not have dreamt of waiting for this young son of his; but Bobby was too completely under the sway of the imperious Cicely to dispute her commands. He took his leave sadly and submissively; and then she observed: "As for you, Mr. Chetwode,

your way is the same as ours, for some little distance at all events."

"Indeed!" he said; "that is very fortunate for me." But he did not speak as if he felt her companionship to be any great privilege, and she glanced at him with an innocent surprise at his indifference which almost made him laugh.

"Now tell me," said he, to account for the smile which he could not altogether suppress, "how I am to convert myself into a good John Bull. Will it be easy, do you think?"

She frowned slightly. "Of course it will not be easy," she answered, "if you prefer being a foreigner; but really that seems to me a very odd sort of taste to have. Because you see you *are* an Englishman."

"More or less of one."

"Why, your family is English; everybody belongs to his father's family. I know you have been brought up in Russia, but that's only an accident. You wouldn't have been a cannibal if you had been brought up in the Fiji Islands, I hope."

"I venture to hope not. Still there is no saying to what lengths one may not be carried by the influence of early associations. I have no reason to love England,

whereas I have—or at least I suppose I ought to have—many reasons for loving Russia, where most of my friends and all my relations reside."

"Well," said Cicely, with fine liberality, "there is something in that, no doubt. At the same time, I shouldn't care to be neither the one thing nor the other, if I were you. Being English, and having property in England, I should wish to live on my property and do the best I could for it. And most likely that is just what you do wish, or you wouldn't have come home."

Mark's grave face was lighted up for an instant by a smile, and he glanced at the girl with more interest than he had hitherto displayed in her.

"Possibly you are right," he answered; "possibly that is what I want, but really I am not very sure about it. My property, as you know, has shrunk to such small dimensions that I should hardly find employment in looking after it, and my actual reason for coming here was the very simple one that an empty house is too expensive a luxury for me."

"You might quite well live here without being at home all the year round," said the girl, "and as for employment, a country gentleman need never be without that."

And straightway she began to point out to him how he might occupy his time agreeably to himself and profitably to his neighbours. She had not the most distant comprehension of the man to whom she was talking; her ideas of life and happiness and duty were necessarily circumscribed, but she had perfect confidence in their accuracy, and, such as they were, she expressed them well. As for Mark, he was not particularly interested in her ideas, but he became a good deal interested in her, and it was with unaffected regret that he wished her good-bye on being informed that the point at which their paths diverged had been reached. He did not, however, offer to walk any farther than that point, nor did he respond, save by an inarticulate murmur, to Miss Bligh's expressed hope that they might meet again before long.

"I think he is rather queer, and rather nice," was the verdict which his unusual behaviour elicited from Cicely after he had withdrawn.

But Archie, who during all this time had been relegated to the background, and whose temper had not been improved by the enforced society of Miss Skipwith, said:

"I don't know so much about his being nice; he's

queer enough for anything. One can forgive a Frenchman for trying to look like an Englishman, though of course he never succeeds; but there must be something very wrong indeed about an Englishman who tries to look like a Frenchman—especially when he does succeed."

"Oh, I daresay he will learn better things in time," answered Cicely. "In fact," she added demurely, "I feel sure he will, because I mean to take him in hand."

And the disgusted grunt with which this announcement was received was doubtless a source of amusement and gratification to her.

CHAPTER IX.

MORTON REPRESENTS THE FAMILY

It seemed that Miss Skipwith could not say enough in praise of Mr. Chetwode that evening. He was clever, he was distinguished, he had a singular charm of manner; she had not for a long time met any one who had so impressed her with a sense of his superiority to the common run of men. She prattled on in this way both before and in the course of dinner; and her brother-in-law could not imagine why, until it dawned upon him that this artless schemer proposed to set the new-comer up as a counter-attraction to Archie. That discovery tickled him, and he led her on by a few careless, disparaging observations, which eventually had the effect of drawing his daughter into the arena.

"He may not be such a black swan as Aunt Susan makes him out; but at all events he is our nearest neighbour, and of course he must be called upon," said Cicely, decidedly.

"It is always comforting to have one's duty set before one in such plain language," remarked Mr. Bligh. "The only question is, who is to call upon him? *I* can't, because I have no legs; and I'm afraid conventionality would hardly allow of your doing it, my dear. Would the emergency be met by my sending a groom over with my card, do you think?"

Cicely shook her head.

"Much too formal," said she. "He wouldn't like it; he would take it as an intimation that you were willing to acknowledge him, but didn't care about cultivating him."

"*Do* I care about cultivating him?" inquired Mr. Bligh.

"You know you do," replied his daughter, tranquilly; "you know you are unhappy in your mind about that land of his, and you would like to have a chance of explaining to him that it isn't your fault that you are in possession of it."

"If I know myself," said Mr. Bligh—"but possibly I don't know myself—that is quite the last subject which I should wish to discuss with him. My title, I am assured, is a perfectly good title, legitimately acquired. If he thinks differently, he can go to law

about it; but I doubt whether he and I should become better friends by talking the matter over."

"Oh, you will talk the matter over," said Cicely, confidently. "He has taken up a wrong view of it, and you will have to set him right. Only there *is* a little difficulty about the first step, I admit. How would it do to write and ask him to dine?"

"I should not venture to take such a liberty," Mr. Bligh declared; and Miss Skipwith, who was very punctilious, was also of opinion that that suggestion was inadmissible.

"My dear," said she, "there must be a visit, and the visit must be returned, before any invitation can be sent."

"Well, then," said Cicely, "perhaps Archie might go, and take papa's card with him."

Archie looked recalcitrant; but before he could open his lips Morton had thrown himself into the breach.

"It seems to me," observed the latter languidly, "that I am marked out by fate as the proper person to undertake this act of social servitude. At what time do you suppose that your friend goes out for a walk, Cicely? At four o'clock?"

Cicely looked doubtfully at her brother. She could

hardly dispute his right to represent the head of the family, but she was pretty sure that he did not entertain the friendly and neighbourly sentiments of the head of the family, and she thought it very likely that he would be rude to Mr. Chetwode.

"I know nothing about his habits," she said; "but I hope he may be out when you call."

"Thanks, very much; so do I. Perhaps you hope that for his sake, though, not for mine."

"Well, for your sake, and for his sake, and for everybody's sake. I don't think you would get on particularly well together, and I want him to like us."

For some reason or other this remark appeared to amuse Morton, who began to laugh, and who laughed even more heartily when he noticed the frown on Archie's brow.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid," he returned; "he shall like us. Not me as an individual, perhaps—that would be a little too much to hope for—but he shall like us collectively, and when he has dined here I have no doubt that he will like you in particular. That, however, will naturally depend upon yourself. As for me, I will put on my best clothes and my best manners

to-morrow afternoon, and I humbly trust that I may not disgrace the family."

Morton was as good as his word. After luncheon on the following day he set out on foot for Upton Chetwode, much though he disliked pedestrian exercise. There was, however, one thing that he disliked even more, which was getting upon the back of a horse; and Miss Skipwith had appropriated the carriage. For that matter, the walk was not a disagreeable one, being over grass or footpaths the whole way, and he had plenty of interesting reflections to keep him company.

Since his arrival at the Priory, Morton Bligh had been somewhat dejected in mind. His presence under his father's roof was, of course, due to a motive which everybody had divined, and which he himself had decided that it would be stupid and clumsy to conceal. His father was going to die; he was his father's natural and legitimate heir, and it was necessary for him to show that, whatever he might be, or have been, he could live an outwardly decent and respectable life. It was necessary, he thought, for him to do this, because he believed his father to be one of those scrupulous persons who always set duty above inclination, and because he could form a tolerably shrewd guess what Mr.

Bligh's inclinations were. But his father's demeanour had puzzled him. Mr. Bligh had been perfectly good-humoured, tolerant, and amiable, had not repulsed him, nor made the faintest allusion to incidents which could not have been alluded to without embarrassment; yet not a word had been spoken as to the management of the property, or as to any of the topics to which a dying man might be expected to refer in conversation with his successor. It was plain—or so, at all events, Morton feared—that the dying man's will had not yet been signed. Now there was very little probability that Cicely would be placed in her brother's shoes. One does not replace a son by a daughter, and Morton himself had a contempt for women which he suspected his father of sharing to a considerable extent. But doubtless a nephew who has married your only daughter and who bears your own name may, at a pinch, be made to do duty for a son who has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. This was what troubled Morton. He saw, and could not help seeing—even Miss Skipwith saw it—that Archie was receiving every encouragement to propose to Cicely; he saw, what perhaps Miss Skipwith was too blinded by prejudice to see, that the young soldier had fallen desperately in love with his

cousin; and, for his own part, he was only too well aware that nobody would pity him if he were to receive a substantial money legacy instead of his birthright.

His record, in truth, was shockingly bad. It was not only that he had led a life of idle dissipation, and that his debts had had to be paid for him more than once; it was not only that he had gone his own way, taking no notice of his father and sister, and never so much as writing a letter to them from year's end to year's end; these are offences which may be pardoned. But (being by no means devoid of brains, and having a certain mischievous bent of mind) he had at one time amused himself by reading up the indictments which have been brought by learned men against accepted systems of theology, and, though he was in reality no scholar, he had written articles in advanced reviews which had gained for him a certain notoriety. That had been a great mistake, and he was very sorry now that he had committed it, because, as a matter of fact, he did not care two straws what mankind at large might be pleased to believe in and worship. However, there it was in black and white, and there was no getting out of it. Worse things, moreover, than that might be said of him. London society in these days has not the name of

being over-squeamish; yet there were many men and many women in London who would not be seen speaking to Morton Bligh.

And so the long and the short of it was, that if by any means Cicely could be prevented from marrying Archie, that end must be accomplished. Therefore Morton was on his way to call upon Mark Chetwode, in whom he had observed with satisfaction that his sister's interest had been powerfully aroused. Archie, it might be assumed, would not be made Mr. Bligh's heir if he did not marry Cicely; Mark Chetwode would surely not be raised to that enviable position if he did. And Chetwode was poor, and Cicely was not only pretty but would have a fortune of thirty or forty thousand pounds at least.

The solitary denizen of Upton Chetwode was smoking a cigarette in his comfortless dining-room when his visitor was announced. After a somewhat formal greeting, he expressed a hope that the latter did not mind the smell of tobacco, to which Morton replied that he would be grateful if he too might be allowed to smoke.

A man who will smoke with you is by that very fact to some extent a companionable creature, and Morton's

manners were pleasant enough when he took the trouble to make them so. Mark rather liked the man, though (as he was accustomed to scrutinize men and motives) it did not take him very long to discover that there was some unavowed reason for this display of neighbourly courtesy. Morton, it should be mentioned, had deplorable nerves. Without being precisely a glutton or a sot, he had nevertheless for many years habitually eaten and drunk more than was good for him, besides having taken very little exercise; and the consequence was that when he attempted to be artful he speedily made his aims evident to a practised observer. Mark, cold, temperate, and constitutionally suspicious, was a great deal more than a match for him. They discussed (for what else could they begin by discussing ?) local topics and local means of passing the time; Morton avowed his abhorrence of the country, and was pleased to learn that his host was no great lover of field sports.

"You'll be bored to death down here," he said; "that's a matter of course. But, perhaps, if you're inclined to be charitable, you'll sometimes come over to the Priory and relieve our chronic boredom. I haven't any inducement to offer you beyond a sincere welcome and the governor's Madeira, which I can conscientiously

praise. By the way, he sent you all sorts of messages and apologies. He would have come to pay his respects to you in person, but he never gets beyond the garden now, as I daresay you have heard from my old aunt. You have won Aunt Susan's heart, I must tell you; and as for Cicely—well, I suppose it wouldn't be proper to say that she has lost her heart to you," laughed Morton; "but anyhow she is very anxious to see more of you. Won't you come and dine quietly some evening?"

Mark said what was polite and necessary in reply. He began in a casual, indifferent way to put indirect questions; also he rang the bell, and ordered brandy-and-soda, of which his guest was pleased to partake freely; and so, in about twenty minutes, he found out all he wanted to know. That Morton was not upon the best of terms with his father, that he was in mortal dread of being ousted by his cousin Archie, and that he was only sojourning at the Priory now in the hope of bringing personal influence to bear against the interloper—all this was elicited, without effort on the one side or consciousness of self-betrayal on the other, and all doubt as to the nature of Morton's scheme was removed when that ingenuous plotter remarked:

"I assure you that I don't half like the idea of having

to spend the rest of my life in this neighbourhood; but it will have to come to that, I expect. And I shall be all alone, too; for it isn't over and above likely that my sister will care to stay and keep house for me. She will have a fortune of her own—something like fifty thousand pounds, probably." (For Morton thought there could be no harm in adding a trifle of ten thousand pounds or so to his mental estimate.)

"Your cousin is a very good-looking young man," said Mark, with his faint smile, and his slight foreign accent. "I should like to be your cousin."

"I don't call him good-looking; and he's as stupid as an owl," returned Morton. "Why should you want to change places with him?"

"Oh, only a fancy, which perhaps it is impertinent in me to mention. Seeing them together, it struck me that he was upon terms of something more than friendship with your sister. that was all. So much beauty, and fifty thousand pounds besides—you must admit that he is enviable."

"I think," said Morton, who had swallowed two rather strong glasses of brandy-and-soda, "that if I were ten years younger, and if I admired a girl with Cicely's advantages, I should be no more afraid of such a fellow

as Archie than I should be afraid of the curate or the doctor."

Having delivered himself of this statement with much impressiveness, he rose to depart. Mark's speech had been unquestionably impertinent—even very impertinent; but Morton did not resent it. On the contrary, he was quite pleased to have been furnished with an opportunity of asserting so unequivocally that Archie was no formidable antagonist. Thus it is that the reasoning powers of the brain become enfeebled when the other organs of the body are not kept in a proper state of subjection,

"You'll come to dinner, then, some day soon, won't you?" he said, with a slight thickness of utterance, as he held out his limp little hand. "I'll tell Cicely to send you a formal invitation, though you won't be asked to a formal party. I believe we do give formal dinner-parties from time to time, but we won't be so brutal as to include you among our victims."

When he had gone, Mark laughed a little and walked once or twice up and down the room; and then, taking up his pen, resumed the letter which had been interrupted by the entrance of the visitor.

"It seems to me," he wrote, "that I am in a fair way

towards carrying out your benevolent programme. The brother of the young lady whom you were so kind as to select for my future partner through life has just been calling here, and has hinted broadly—possibly a little too broadly—that he would be charmed to welcome me as his brother-in-law. Naturally he has his reasons: he is not quite so disinterested as you are. He thinks that his father wishes to bring about a marriage between Miss Cicely (that, I believe, is her name) and a young cousin of whom old Mr. Wingfield spoke to me, and whom I forget whether I mentioned to you or not. In the case of that project succeeding, the young cousin, it seems, would be made heir to the entire property; but it is not considered likely that any other son-in-law than the cousin would be preferred before the heir-apparent. Consequently I am implored to come forward, and a bribe of fifty thousand pounds is offered to me by way of inducement. Would you believe that, poor as I am, I hesitate to take advantage of this generous suggestion? I am sure you would not believe it if you saw Miss Bligh, who happens to be quite pretty and agreeable, and that it would be difficult to convince you how little her charms have to say to the matter. Do you think fifty thousand pounds a very large sum of

money? In all truth and candour, I think liberty is worth more than that; but I am aware that upon such points your ideas differ from mine."

Having wound up his letter, and addressed it to Madame Souravieff, he put on his hat and walked down to the iron railing which divided the garden from the park. Upon this he dropped his arms, and so stood for a long time, revolving many considerations in his mind. It is quite true that a bribe of fifty thousand pounds hardly tempted him, welcome though such a supply of hard cash would have been to a man in his straitened circumstances; it was also true that Cicely's personal attractions had left him cold. If you are not in love with a woman, what can it signify whether she is pretty or ugly? But there was one thing he cared about a good deal, and always rather wondered at himself for caring about, which was the recovering of the lands of which he considered that he had been wrongfully dispossessed. No one can relinquish without something of a pang and a wrench the religious faith in which he has been brought up; and in much the same way Mark Chetwode found it impossible to free himself from the impressions which had been dinned into his ears from

his earliest childhood. Legally speaking, he might have no sort of case against these prosperous, wealthy, condescending Blighs, but he could not help longing to be avenged upon them, to get the better of them; and if this desire could not be satisfied in one way, perhaps it might be in another. To get the better of the debilitated creature who had just left him would surely be a task of no great difficulty; and as to the cousin, he appeared to be a very commonplace person. There remained Mr. Bligh, with whom, of course, it would be needful to ingratiate oneself; but, as far as could be gathered from report, Mr. Bligh was only too eager to find some heir who might decently be substituted for his son. Was the stake worth playing for? Mark eventually decided that it was; and, oddly enough, what helped him towards this decision was his conviction that if ever success should seem to be within his reach, he would have no more vehement opponent to contend against than Madame Souravieff.

CHAPTER X.

CICELY HAS POOR SPORT

In these days, hunting ladies are so numerous that it is scarcely more necessary to apologize for them than George III. thought it necessary to write an apology for the Bible. Nevertheless, there still remain certain old-fashioned people who think that a woman is out of her place in the hunting-field, and of these Miss Skipwith was one. She had never felt able to approve of her niece following the hounds, and although she had never been able to prevent her niece from doing that, or anything else which the self-willed young woman in question intended to do, she considered herself bound to uphold her testimony from time to time—that is, as often as the hounds met within manageable distance of the Priory. And it is needless to add that the escort of Archie Bligh did not present itself to her in the light of a mitigating circumstance. But what could she do when the girl's own father

backed her up, and refused to see the slightest impropriety in her enjoying what he called a "good healthy gallop" in the company of her cousin? Mr. Bligh had himself been an ardent sportsman until his health had broken down; he had perhaps a somewhat exaggerated admiration for the virtues which sport, combined with a spice of danger, brings into prominence; and possibly he did not sufficiently recognize that, although bravery may be a very fine thing, the kind of bravery which life demands of women is of a very different class from that which it demands of men.

And so, when the hounds met at Upton Mill, it was altogether useless for Miss Skipwith to try and defraud Cicely and Archie of a happy day.

"My dear Susan," said Mr. Bligh, in response to certain oft-repeated remonstrances of hers, "they mean to be there, and it is my belief that neither you nor I can hold them back by anything short of hamstringing every horse in the stables; to which I am not prepared to consent. You need not be so alarmed; they won't come to any harm. One is only young for a few years, and during these few years wise young people make the most of their time."

"You speak as if we were only here to amuse our-

selves, Wilfrid," said Miss Skipwith, in a dissatisfied tone of voice.

"Do I? I have never been able to discover exactly what we are here for; and, with all due deference, I doubt whether you can tell me. But one thing I know: we are born with certain cravings which are bound to be satisfied in this way or in that; and for my part I have always been strongly on the side of physical exertion and exhaustion. You think perhaps that a young man and a young woman who go out hunting together are like a young man and a young woman in a ball-room; but then you have never hunted. I am going to put Archie up on the Flying Dutchman, and I know what that means, though you don't. When once hounds are running he will forget all about Cicely, and, what is better still, Cicely, who is going to ride Hypatia, will forget all about him. Ah, if I could only have one more day with them—just one more before I die!"

Perceiving that it was a waste of time to reason with a man who could talk in that way, Miss Skipwith sighed and gave in, and kept her own opinion, as usual; and one fine morning Archie and Cicely trotted off to the meet, without let or hindrance. Moreton declined

to accompany them, owning with his customary frankness that he had no longer nerve to hunt.

"I have only one neck," he said, "and nothing would annoy me more than to break it. However, I wouldn't for the world deter you from breaking yours." And this was as true and honest an assertion as any assertion could be.

Hunting had already ceased in many parts of England, but that was a late country.

"We go on up to the last permissible moment," Cicely informed her companion, "and begin again at the first. The worst of it is that I can't hunt at all regularly now, because it isn't thought right for me to go out quite alone."

"Well, I'll be here as much and as often as I can," Archie replied.

"Thank you; that is very kind of you. But you must please to remember that when you are here your duty will be simply to escort me to the meet. From the moment we have found you will cease to have any responsibility, and you will only think of your own interests. I am very well able to take care of myself, and if I catch you attempting to take care of me I will never forgive you. Mind that."

Archie laughed and said: "All right, then; I quite understand."

He was very well pleased with his mount—a powerful, free-going grey; but as he had never ridden the horse before, he could not be aware, as his uncle was, that he was bestriding one of the best hunters that ever was bred, and he fully intended to keep an eye upon his cousin, even though this should prove to his own detriment. Cicely's chestnut mare was an animal of quite another class—nervous, high-couraged, and requiring a light hand and a good deal of riding; but Cicely was an accomplished horsewoman.

"The mare will be all right after the first few minutes," she said, in reply to some expression of uneasiness on Archie's part. "Unless something upsets her at starting she will be as good as gold. You needn't trouble your head about her—or about me either."

But of course he could not help troubling his head about her, and although he admired her seat and her hands, he was vexed and surprised that his uncle should have given her such a mount. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bligh, who did not himself know the meaning of the word fear, had perfect confidence in Cicely's skill, and would have trusted her with any horse in his stables.

At the meet, which was in a central locality, a great concourse of people was assembled. There was young Lord Shoreham, the M.F.H., whose language was apt to be more emphatic than choice, and of whom everybody stood in awe; there was Sir George Dare, a ruddy-cheeked, white-whiskered gentleman, with a good-humoured smile, and a high, squeaky voice; there, too, was Bobby, looking somewhat ill at ease upon the fiddle-headed, raw-boned steed which had been assigned to him. Bobby was not at all fond of hunting, and every time he went out he did so with the full assurance that he carried his life in his hands. That risk, however, he was always willing, like a true-born British sailor, to accept, and he was now about to imperil his neck with more or less of cheerfulness upon the off-chance of earning Cicely's approval. He rode up to her side as soon as she appeared upon the scene, although, while according him a smiling greeting, she warned him not to approach too closely.

"Keep clear of the mare's heels," she said, as, notwithstanding her signal, he drew nearer: "otherwise you may get a broken leg before you know where you are."

But Bobby, who thought he was in much more danger

of getting a broken heart, chose to disregard this caution. His father had engaged Archie in conversation, so that presently he had the privilege of riding with Miss Bligh to the covert-side, and hearing from her own lips that she did not want to have anything more to do with her cousin.

"I know that he is possessed with the idea that he is in charge of me," she said; "and I am sure he will keep looking over his shoulder the whole time—which will exasperate me beyond all bearing. Considering that I know every yard of the country, and that he hasn't ridden over it since he was a boy of sixteen, I really think he would do more wisely to mind his own business, and leave me to mind mine."

Bobby cordially concurred. At the same time he did not quite like the look of Cicely's plunging, bucking mare, and he said with a sigh: "I wish I were capable of taking charge of you; but it is as much as I shall accomplish to make this brute of mine answer his helm, even if we don't part company altogether, as I daresay we shall before long." He added in a melancholy voice: "I suppose you utterly despise a man who can't ride, don't you?"

Now it was true that Cicely thought every man ought

to be able to manage a horse. Sailors, no doubt, are to some extent privileged persons, yet she could not help finding any human being who held on by his reins a trifle ridiculous, and poor Bobby would perhaps have been better advised if he had remained at home that morning. Therefore she left his question unanswered, and after a time he put another one to her: "Are cavalry men always flyers across a country?" he inquired, diffidently.

"Really, I can't tell you," she answered, laughing; "but I don't know why they should be. If Archie sees more of the run than you or I do, he won't have much to brag about. The Dutchman will ask nothing more of him than to stick to his saddle."

Bobby was by no means confident of his own capacity to comply even with that modest requirement; but he was pleased to hear himself bracketed with Cicely, and he resolved to keep alongside of her if he could. That, however, was a programme which he probably could not, under any circumstances, have carried out, and, as it chanced, he lost sight of her almost immediately after deciding upon it. For scarcely had the covert been drawn when a fox was found and got away, and for ten minutes after that event all control over his

own movements was taken out of the young sailor's hands. His career, though brief, was glorious. He was borne at a high rate of speed down a steep hillside ; he was lifted, to his utter amazement, over three stiff fences, after each of which experiences he found himself with his arms round his horse's neck ; and when at length he was deposited quite easily and comfortably in a bed of rushes, he did not in the least realize why he was there, until he became aware of a broad stream in front of him, and came to the just conclusion that his horse had declined to attempt impossibilities.

Cicely, meanwhile, had got off badly. Both she and her mare were taken by surprise, and for several hundred yards they were much hampered by the too numerous field. At the first fence the mare jumped short and very nearly landed on her nose. This perhaps roused her not very amiable temper: for no sooner had she recovered herself than she threw up her head and broke clean away. There was nothing to be done but to sit tight and keep cool. Cicely had sense enough and experience enough to know that: also she had enough of both to be aware that she was in imminent danger of a bad fall. The mare, for the time being, had completely lost her senses, and would certainly

rush blindly at any obstacle that might lie in her path. She might get over such obstacles or she might not: anyhow it was hopeless to attempt to steady her. And so it came to pass that Miss Bligh was only prevented by good luck from jumping upon the hounds, and that Lord Shoreham apostrophized her under his breath in terms quite unfit for reproduction. Her heart failed her a little when she saw a great ragged bullfinch before her, which it was scarcely within the bounds of possibility that she could clear without slackening speed, and she made up her mind that the end was at hand. However, she threw up her arm to protect her face, and was hurled through somehow or other, though not without a crash and a jerk which very nearly sent her out of her saddle. Immediately after this the mare began to falter, and was easily brought to a standstill in the middle of a ploughed field.

"I thought as much," murmured Cicely, as she slipped her foot out of the stirrup and sprang down to the ground; and a brief examination of her mount showed her that her suspicions had been only too well founded. The mare, with starting eyeballs and heaving flanks, was quiet enough now, while from a long jagged wound in her shoulder the blood was dripping slowly.

It was very evident that not only could there be no more hunting for Miss Bligh that day, but that one of the best animals in her father's possession had been marked for life. This, it will be allowed, was no fault of Cicely's; but she felt very guilty all the same, and the worst of it was that she could not judge what the extent of the mischief might be. She had no means of binding up the mare's wound, nor could she tell by a hasty inspection whether it was deep or merely superficial. All she knew was that it behoved her to lead the sufferer home without further loss of time; and this she immediately prepared to do, hooking up her riding habit and passing her arm through the bridle. One comfort was that she was in no danger of being bothered by offers of unskilled assistance; for Bobby Dare had disappeared, and on a distant hillside against the sky she could see Archie and his gallant grey sailing along in blissful unconsciousness of everything save the delightful fact that they had shown a clean pair of heels to their competitors. So, perceiving that there was a gate at the corner of the field, she made for it, and was soon on the high road which connects Abbotsport with the county town.

Along this road it so chanced that a landed pro-

prietor of the vicinity was at that moment wending his lonely way. He was deeply immersed in thought, and his eyes were cast down, so that he did not at once become aware that a lady leading a lame horse had debouched upon the grassy wayside ahead of him. As soon, however, as he did become aware of her he quickened his pace, caught her up and accosted her.

"How do you do, Miss Bligh?" said he, taking off his hat. "Why are you on foot? Have you had an accident?"

Cicely recognized Mr. Chetwode, without much pleasure at an encounter which she felt to be inopportune. She wanted to get home and she didn't want to talk.

"I'm afraid I have staked my mare," she answered. "Do you know anything about horses? Perhaps you can tell me whether she is badly hurt or not."

It did not seem very likely that this alien had any knowledge of such subjects, and she only put the question to him because she supposed that, being a man, he might feel slighted if she did not pay him the compliment of consulting him; but in truth, Mark, who had always been a lover of horses, possessed some little veterinary skill, and after a brief examination he

was able to assure her that the damage done was comparatively trifling.

"I do not promise you that no trace of the mishap shall remain," said he. "The cut will have to be sewn up, and unluckily it is not a clean cut; but I think I may safely say that the real value of the animal will not be affected, although, perhaps, the selling value may be."

Cicely was relieved and was also decidedly impressed. She came of a sporting family, and although she was personally large-minded enough to admit that a man may be an admirable member of the community and yet not know a horse from a cow, she could not help thinking him a good deal more admirable if he did. She at once dropped into easy conversation with her companion, relating the particulars of her misadventure, to which he listened with deferential interest while he paced slowly by her side.

"You ought to hunt," she remarked, after a time. "Why don't you?"

"For the best reason in the world," he answered. "I have no horses, and no money to buy any."

Cicely was silent for a moment or two. She had an uncomfortable feeling that although Mr. Chetwode's

impecuniosity was no fault of hers, he might consider her father in some measure responsible for it.

"But really," she resumed at length, "I don't see how you can go on living here unless you hunt. There is nothing else to be done during the winter, you see. Except, of course, the shooting, which would help you through a few months."

"Only I can't afford either keepers or pheasants," observed Mark, with a smile. "Perhaps, however, I shall not go on living here."

"You mean that you will let your house again?"

"If I can find any one sufficiently insane to take it. If I can't——" He shrugged his shoulders and drew down the corners of his mouth expressively.

Thereupon Cicely read him a serious lecture. She declared emphatically that it is the plain duty of landowners, whether rich or poor, to reside upon their land. "A tenant," she said, "can never take the place of the real owner of the soil, nor fulfil half his functions;" and this assertion she supported by instances and examples.

"After all, what will you do if you leave Upton Chetwode again, I wonder?" she inquired in conclusion.

"Ah!" he returned, lifting his eyebrows, "I wonder!"

He thought her very pretty, and her confident way of

offering her opinion and advice amused him; but she did not touch his heart. Madame Souravieff would perhaps have said that he had no heart to be touched. And it may be that Cicely, who, though no flirt, yet was accustomed to homage of a kind which this stranger showed no inclination to pay her, was a little puzzled and piqued by a failure of which she could not but be conscious: for she certainly took great pains to be pleasant to him, and even went so far as to hint that she could enter into his feelings about those ancestral possessions of his which had passed into other hands.

"Of course it must be horrid for you," she said, when he had informed her that the subject was rather a sore one with him; "but then if I were you, I think I should set before myself as an object the getting of that land back again. It would be something to live for."

He laughed.

"But in order to attain that object two things are indispensable—first, that the present proprietor should be willing to sell; and, secondly, that I should have money enough to tempt him. How would you get over those difficulties, Miss Bligh?"

"I don't believe the first is a difficulty at all," she answered. "As for the second, money may be acquired

after fifty fashions. Where there's a will there's a way."

She dismissed him at her father's gates, frankly expressing a hope that she might see him again soon, and if Mark placed a mistaken interpretation upon her words and demeanour, it would be hardly fair to blame him. He was not a coxcomb, but he had some excuse for thinking that he understood women, and it did appear to him that he had been invited in pretty plain language to offer himself as a candidate for the hand of the heiress. But before complying with that invitation it would perhaps be prudent to ascertain whether she really was to be an heiress or not.

CHAPTER XI.

COPPARD IN TROUBLE

"Oh, we're quite convinced that you are guilty. We don't entertain any doubt at all as to that. But we have come to the conclusion that the evidence is insufficient, and therefore you will be discharged this time; and a very lucky fellow you are to get off, I can tell you—a precious lucky fellow! Now you take my advice and be very careful what you are about in future; because if you are brought up before us again you may not find us so disposed to be lenient."

This remarkable illustration of that fine old axiom of English law which declares every man innocent until he has been proved guilty was provided for the delectation of a limited audience by Sir George Dare, who was sitting upon the bench of justice, flanked by several anxious colleagues. Sir George's colleagues were always a little anxious about him; because in these evil days one never can be sure that there is not some

mischievous busybody at hand taking notes, and it is of course most undesirable that paragraphs should get into the newspapers which may tend to lessen the respect of the public for the unpaid magistracy. But Sir George cared not two straws for his colleagues or the newspapers or the public, and nothing whatever was to be gained by digging your elbows into his ribs.

"What I think I shall say," he was wont to reply when counsels of prudence were offered to him, and if he thought it would do any culprit good to tell him that he was a rascal, although his rascality could not be proved by strict rule of evidence, he never shrank from doing his duty to that culprit. The culprits had no objection. They knew that Sir George was a great deal more fond of scolding than of passing severe sentences, and they knew and cared as little about his law as he did himself.

The prisoner who had been addressed in the terms above mentioned said: "Thank 'ee, sir," and touched his grey forelock, preparatory to resuming his position as an honest householder without a stain upon his character. David Coppard thought it no shame to be a poacher, and if he was a notorious thief, he was seldom so designated in his hearing, because of the length and

strength of his arms. Behind his back he was, of course, liable, like the rest of us, to have unpleasant things said of him by malicious and cowardly persons, but no sensible man deigns to take notice of what may be said behind his back. Coppard was in the habit of borrowing (not stealing, which is a very different thing) the lines and nets and lobster-pots of his neighbours. This was an understood thing, and the freedom was readily pardoned by his neighbours in consideration of the borrower's admirable seamanship, which was almost always at their service. As for rabbits, everybody knows what mischief those animals do. and how much more they would do, if their numbers were not kept down by the exertions of nocturnal sportsmen. But unfortunately there are certain miserable landlubbers whose minds are so warped by prejudice and selfishness that they begin to make a fuss if a man cannot settle his little account for tea and sugar at the end of a year, and who will avail themselves of any paltry pretext that may come handy to get such a man into trouble. Thus it was that Mr. Coppard had been subjected to the indignity of arrest upon a charge of petty larceny, and had incurred no small inconvenience in obtaining the acquittal which was his due.

It will, perhaps, hardly be believed that any one could be so mean as to give a fellow-citizen and constant customer into custody because a trumpery hammer belonging to him had been discovered in the possession of that fellow-citizen, yet this is what Simpkins, the Abbotsport grocer, had done; and as Coppard trudged homewards nothing seemed to him more obvious and just and essential than that he should take the first opportunity of paying Simpkins out. As for the hammer, he had no doubt made use of it. When a derelict hammer finds its way by some unexplained means to one's premises, and when one happens, oddly enough, to be in want of such an article at that very time, one naturally makes use of it. Surely the fact of its having a big S branded upon the handle does not saddle a busy man with the responsibility of running round to everybody in Abbotsport whose name begins with an S and inquiring if they have mislaid anything. The magistrates, at all events, had very properly decided that no such responsibility rested upon Mr. Coppard, and he was free from any feeling of rancour against them. Still the fact remained that he had been very badly treated. So that when, on reaching the high road, he chanced to encounter Mr. Robert Dare and young Mr.

Bligh, he could not rest satisfied with touching his hat to these gentlemen, but must needs impart to them the story of his wrongs.

"A hunjust charge; that's where 'tis, you see, sir," said he, fixing his eye on Bobby, who looked the more sympathetic of the two. "I can't get no remedy, so they tell me; but it do come hard on a workin' man to be deprived of two days' earnings, not to mention the missus's bad temper, which I shall be sure to suffer from it soon as ever I get 'ome. I couldn't estimate this job at a farthing less than ten shillings out o' my pocket, sir."

Bobby's finger and thumb were at once inserted into his own. Bobby had a sneaking affection for old Coppard, though he was quite as well aware as his father that Coppard's character would not bear too close investigation.

But Archie, who had no foolish predilections of the kind, and who was in a bad humour into the bargain, said:

"It strikes me that you have not much to complain about, my friend. People who are found in possession of stolen goods don't as a general rule get off scot-free, and I rather suspect that if I had been upon the bench you wouldn't have been at liberty at this moment."

Coppard bent his shaggy brows and from beneath them shot an angry glance at the speaker.

"Then, sir," said he, "I'm 'umbly thankful as you're not upon the bench now, nor likely to be. Nor likely to be," he added with emphasis, while he pocketed Bobby's half-sovereign, saying: "Thank 'ee kindly, Cap'en, and 'twill be a dooty and a pleasure to me to drink your good 'ealth. Likewise that of Sir George and all true gentlemen; which there ain't a many of 'em left, sir."

"Well, don't drink our healths more than once or twice, you know, Coppard," returned Bobby, laughing.

"He'll drink as long as he has any money to spend on drink, you may be sure," said Archie, when the two young men had resumed their walk. "What an ass you are to tip such an old ruffian! You're only stimulating the liquor traffic, and doing him a great deal more harm than good."

This being in all probability true, Bobby remained meekly silent. From the days when they had been boys together he had always been accustomed to be called an ass by Archie, and had always felt that the accusation was justified by facts. He had no sort of admiration for himself, while he had a great admiration for his companion, mingled with such envy as an honest

man may entertain of one who has ever surpassed him in those attributes which are apt to excite general admiration. Wandering towards Abbotsport that morning, with a secret hope of meeting Cicely, he had met her cousin instead, and having been informed by the latter that Miss Bligh was spending the day at the Rectory, had generously invited him to come home to luncheon. This invitation Archie had accepted after a moment's hesitation. He did not want to be bored by the numerous Miss Dares, but he was still less desirous of returning to the Priory and struggling to keep upon terms of civility with Morton while deprived of Cicely's restraining influence; and Cicely had given him to understand that she had parish matters to talk over with Mrs. Lowndes which would keep her occupied until at least the middle of the afternoon.

"I hear you were in at the death the other day," remarked Bobby, after a pause.

"Oh yes," answered the other, in a somewhat dissatisfied voice; "I couldn't have helped it unless I had tried. I certainly should have tried if I had known my cousin had come to grief; but I lost sight of her and took it for granted that her mare had refused the brook. What became of you?"

"Well, I can hardly tell you," replied Bobby. "After a bit I found myself standing on my head, and then I had a great piece of work to catch my brute of a horse. When I did catch him, I climbed up on his back and went home. It didn't occur to me that Miss Bligh might be in need of assistance."

"She wasn't in need of any assistance that you could have given her," responded Archie, rather unkindly. "A man who had known what he was about might have changed the saddles and saved her a long walk, that's all. As it happened, she fell in with that fellow Chetwode, who, she says, set her mind at ease. Though how he could have set her mind at ease without telling a pretty big cram I don't know, considering that the mare is marked for life."

Instowe, the residence of Sir George Dare, was a large rambling white house of no architectural pretensions. That it was large was a fortunate circumstance, seeing that it corresponded in that respect with Sir George's family. Sir George was the father of five sons and six daughters. The former were all earning their living, or almost earning it, in various professions, and only one of them, Bobby, was now at home: but the latter remained under the paternal roof, and Lady Dare

feared that there was every possibility of their remaining there permanently, because it was useless to shut one's eyes to the fact that they were not pretty. Plain they could not fairly be called; but in a county cruelly denuded of bachelors there is little chance for girls who have only just escaped being plain; and as for seasons in London, Sir George declared that once in three years was the very utmost that his resources could be made to meet. Consequently Lady Dare was a little peevish at times.

She received the unexpected guests with a good deal of friendliness; and Archie, who had known the stout, grey-haired, harassed-looking woman all his life, and had always been rather of a favourite of hers, was put into somewhat better humour by her cordiality. Archie, after all, was unmarried, and certain to be pretty well provided for by his rich uncle. It was said, to be sure, that he was smitten with his cousin; but that did not at all prove that his cousin was smitten with him, and the most unlikely events are for ever occurring. Lady Dare would have thought it very wrong and very foolish to show any lack of civility to the young soldier; nor were the six Misses Dare (whose ages ranged from seventeen to eight-and-twenty) remiss

in welcoming this addition to the family luncheon-party. Good-humoured, rosy-faced Sir George, who bustled in just as the big bell on the top of the house was set going, was quite as hearty and much more disinterested. Sir George reposed his trust in Providence, and imagined that if his daughters were destined to marry, the right man would turn up at the right time. He entertained no sort of hope of Archie Bligh, who, for his part, he sincerely trusted might marry Cicely and oust that worse than useless creature, Morton.

"Well," he said, as soon as he had taken his place at the head of the table and had commenced operations upon the joint before him, "we let off your friend Coppard this morning, Bobby. Not that he deserved it. There isn't a more poaching, thieving vagabond in these parts, and so I've told him scores of times. Much he cares what one tells him! Still the rascal has a wife and family."

"He has a great respect for you, Sir George," remarked Archie. "We met him on our way here, and Bobby gave him half a sovereign, which he said he would expend in drinking your health."

"The devil he did!" ejaculated Sir George. "Confound the fellow! Why I gave him half-a-crown myself

to compensate him for his loss of time; and quite enough too. I tell you what it is, Bobby; if you're going to behave in this way, the sooner you get afloat again the better. Half-a-sovereign for stealing a hammer! At that rate the next time he helps himself to my pheasants he'll expect a five-pound note, I suppose."

"And very likely get it," remarked the eldest Miss Dare, who was credited by her family with a great deal of practical common sense. "Bobby," she continued, "may be excused; he knows no better. But really, papa, I don't understand why you gave Coppard that half-crown."

"My dear, I have told you," replied Sir George. "The man had lost a day's work; and after all it was a trumpery charge. Very shabby of Simpkins, in my opinion, and I shall certainly let him know what I think of him."

"I wish you would mention to him at the same time that he systematically sends us short measure of everything," said Lady Dare. "One gets one's groceries from the local man because it is one's duty, and one submits to their being very bad and very dear; but it is a little too much that he should swindle us into the bargain."

The conversation after this turned chiefly upon the misdeeds of Simpkins and others, and was utterly uninteresting to Archie, who ate his mutton in silence and wished himself away. Nor was he much better pleased when the topic of Lady Dare's annual ball, which was appointed to take place shortly, was introduced. He was obliged to say that he would be delighted to attend that festivity, but he inwardly resolved that his presence should be conditional upon that of Cicely, which he knew from her own lips to be as yet an uncertain factor.

But Lady Dare was not so well informed.

"I daresay," she remarked graciously, "that we may trust Cicely to see that you do not fail us. I haven't yet sent a card to your cousin Morton," she added in a dubious tone. "Do you think he would come?"

"I'm sure he would if he suspected that you didn't want him," said Archie. "Of course you don't want him."

"Well, under all the circumstances——" began Lady Dare. But the circumstances could not be discussed before her daughters, so she left her sentence unfinished.

"Don't forget to ask Chetwode, by the way," called

out Sir George from the other end of the table. "I rode over to call upon him the other day, but he wasn't at home. You've seen him I suppose, Archie?"

"Oh yes, several times," answered Archie. "He was dining with us last night."

"Was he really? I'm very glad to hear that. There was an estrangement, you know, in his father's time—quite uncalled for—and I was afraid this young man might keep it up. And what is he like, eh? Pleasant sort of fellow?"

"I should think most people would call him so," Archie was generous enough to reply; "I haven't talked very much to him myself."

"He is dreadfully impoverished, I understand," observed Lady Dare, with a sigh which was not altogether caused by pity for the impoverished one.

"He can't help that, poor beggar!" returned her good-natured husband.

"He might have helped it, by all accounts. However," added Lady Dare, with another sigh, "it doesn't concern us."

After this there was a long discussion as to who was and who was not coming to the dance, and whether Lord Shoreham would put in an appearance, and

whether, if he did, he would behave himself decently, and so forth—all of which was a weariness to Archie, who wanted to get away. He did not get away until the afternoon was well advanced, because he was too young to have acquired that art of creating a pause which very few people acquire before middle age, and in his clumsy efforts to emancipate himself he only succeeded in snubbing everybody.

When at length he had taken his leave, the eldest Miss Dare remarked:

"That young man has far too high an opinion of himself."

It was to her brother that she expressed this opinion, and probably she had reason for believing that it would not be unwelcome to him, since she had led him out into the garden to deliver it.

But Bobby answered disconsolately, "Oh, I don't know. I shouldn't call him a conceited fellow; and even if he is, he has some right to be."

"Bobby," said Miss Dare, impressively, "you are an utter goose. Nobody who is worth anything is conceited; but of course if you will persist in asserting that Archie Bligh is your superior, which he isn't, you will be believed, because it will naturally be supposed

that you ought to know. If I were you I should be ashamed of having so little pluck."

"My dear Jane, what on earth do you mean?" inquired Bobby, with round eyes of astonishment.

"I mean," answered Miss Dare, composedly, "that everybody knows you are in love with Cicely Bligh, and that I know you are quite good enough for her, and that you will never have the slightest chance of getting what you want unless you are bold enough to declare yourself. Girls don't, as a rule, fall in love with their cousins—and I'm sure there's nothing so desperately fascinating about Archie!—but girls will sometimes marry against their own inclinations to please their fathers. Especially when other people are too stupid or too modest to come forward."

Bobby was much surprised. He had been under the impression that his secret had been most carefully kept; but he was not altogether sorry that his sister, upon whose insight he placed great reliance, had divined it. "The truth is," said he, presently, "that I've no business to ask any girl to marry me. I haven't got any coin, you see."

"But she has—or will have."

"That's just it. Putting everything else aside,

wouldn't she think it great cheek of a pauper like me to propose to an heiress?"

"No, she wouldn't. She is not an idiot; and if it is any comfort to you to know that she can read you like a book, you may safely lay that comfort to your soul. Only she will be very apt to despise you if you despise yourself."

Poor Bobby heaved a deep sigh and formed a bold resolution. He was not very sanguine, but, after all, his sister might be right, and could hardly be very far wrong. If one is to be rejected, one may as well be rejected in plain terms as by implication.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY DARE'S BALL

It is the nature of mankind, and perhaps (though one must not venture to affirm this too positively) it is even more the nature of womankind, to desire what seems to be difficult of attainment, and to despise everything that has either been already attained or may be attained without much exertion. That, at all events, seems the most plausible explanation of the fact that Cicely Bligh patronized her cousin Archie, and snubbed Bobby Dare, both of whom were very nice young men indeed, whilst she took an almost respectful interest in Mark Chetwode, who was past his first youth, who had never been handsome, and who took very little trouble to please her. Mark, as has been mentioned, had dined at the Priory, and it may be added that he had produced a generally favourable impression there. Mr. Bligh had found him clever and exceptionally well-informed upon questions of European politics, Miss Skipwith had been

much gratified by his courteous and deferential address, and Morton had liked him as much as he could like anybody except himself—which, to be sure, is not making a strong positive statement, yet must be accounted as strong in a comparative sense. But to Cicely he had scarcely spoken at all; and this naturally interested her, because she could not comprehend why he should be so odd and so very unlike other people.

While Archie was spending a long and weary afternoon with the Dare family, as narrated in the last chapter, Cicely was discussing this abnormal stranger with Mrs. Lowndes; and Mrs. Lowndes, a lean, busy little woman, with iron-grey hair, who had no children, and whose intimate acquaintance with the affairs of every one who dwelt within ten miles of her was proverbial, said:

"My dear, you may depend upon it there is some entanglement. As soon as I had seen the man I said to Robert, 'There is some entanglement.' He has a sort of hopeless look which tells its own tale as plainly as possible. Besides, why is he burying himself down here? Not because he cares a fig for his property, or his tenants, or his neighbours, you may be sure. The whole time that I was talking to him about them he

kept swallowing yawns until his eyes began to water. No! there is a mystery in the case; and if it were not wrong to bet, I would bet you a shilling to sixpence that a woman is at the bottom of it."

Sharp little Mrs. Lowndes was, as we know, both right and wrong. Cicely had no means of verifying the more experienced lady's diagnosis, but it is needless to say that, after that, she was more than ever determined to get at the truth. Mr. Chetwode and his entanglements might not concern her particularly, yet it was intolerable that he should continue to be mysterious. When one holds triumphant sway over the entire countryside one really cannot suffer mysteries to remain unexplained.

And so, when certain parochial matters had been talked over, and Cicely had set out homewards, her thoughts were a good deal occupied with Mr. Chetwode. She was not at all surprised to find Archie loitering at the corner of one of the lanes, nor was she taken in for a moment by his clumsy affectation of a start.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have only just got away from the Rectory?" he asked. "What *can* you have been doing all this time?"

"Have I been a long time? I did not know it was

long," returned Cicely. "Mrs. Lowndes and I always have plenty to do when we meet. And how have you been occupying yourself during my absence?"

"Oh, I've been lunching out, too," answered Archie, rather dismally. "I didn't want to be left to the tender mercies of Morton if I could help it, so, as I happened to come across Bobby Dare, and as he asked me to go and lunch at Instowe, I thought I had better accept. It was deadly dull. They are deadly dull people, and they wouldn't talk about anything except that ball of theirs—which will be deadly dull too, I expect."

"Oh, they have made you promise to go to it, then?"

"I don't think I exactly promised; but if I did I can have a sick headache when the time comes. And I certainly will unless you go. Why can't you go?"

"Well, I told you, you know. I can't be sure that papa will be well enough to be left."

"Oh, but that's only an excuse. Of course you can go if you want to go."

"But why should I want to go? You yourself say that it will be deadly dull, and what inducement have you to offer me beyond that of a waltz or two with you? —and you know, my dear Archie, that unless you have

improved very much you are not quite a first-rate dancer."

"I have improved very much," Archie declared. "Moreover, you will have Bobby to dance with, if that's an inducement. Chetwode too, I believe, for they said they must ask him. Would Chetwode be an inducement?"

"An immense one," answered Cicely, decisively. "If he accepts the invitation I will certainly make an effort to do likewise. I can see you and Bobby any day, but it isn't so easy to see Mr. Chetwode, or to get him to talk when one does see him."

Archie grunted.

"I don't know why you should be so anxious to make him talk," he remarked.

"You would know if you had tried and failed. Perhaps he may have nothing to say; but one would like to make sure of that before giving him up. I wonder whether Morton will go. Did they say anything about asking him?"

"Well—yes, they did," Archie replied, with some hesitation.

"Only they had doubts as to the propriety of introducing him to their friends, I suppose. They are

wrong, I think. Some day or other he will be Lord of Abbotsport Manor, and then they will be obliged to know him. They ought to send him a card—especially as he is almost sure to refuse."

But when this question was spoken of during dinner, it transpired that Morton took no such ungenerous view of his duty to his neighbours. He said he would certainly show himself at the ball, and did not even seem to think that there was any occasion for him to wait until he was asked. Further, he was clearly of opinion that Mark ought to be there, and must be taken there by main force if necessary.

"London is one thing," he was good enough to explain, "and Abbotsport is another. One can't decline civilities here without giving a good and sufficient reason. It's one of the first duties of a man who is trying to become a country gentleman, to submit to social nuisances and look pleasant."

"Are you trying to become a country gentleman, Morton?" inquired his father, with an air of faintly amused curiosity.

"I've no choice in the matter," replied the heir-apparent, calmly; "that is what I'm bound to be, and I must make up my mind to it. Chetwode isn't situated

quite as I am, and I daresay he may be inclined to shirk his burdens. But he mustn't be allowed to shirk them; we'll offer him a lift over to Instowe. He has no trap of his own, I believe."

"Only, as you mean to join us, we shall be four without him," remarked Archie.

"Well," said Morton, composedly, "we can divide ourselves into two carriage loads. In fact we ought to do so, for I am sure Aunt Susan would be grieved beyond measure if her ball dress were crushed. You and the two ladies can take the landau, and I'll drive Chetwode over in the brougham. I suppose the stables do contain an animal who is quiet enough to go in single harness without scaring a nervous man out of his wits?"

Mr. Bligh having intimated that such was probably the case, the subject dropped, and before the date fixed for the ball Morton was at the pains of walking over a second time to Upton Chetwode and bringing a certain amount of pressure to bear upon one whose inclinations appeared to tend towards seclusion. Mark said he didn't think he would derive much amusement from provincial gaieties, but yielded gracefully when he was informed that it was Miss Bligh's particular wish that he should

respond to such advances as his neighbours were able to make to him.

"Cicely went the length of saying that she herself would not put in an appearance unless you did," Morton averred. "She's tremendously in earnest about it: and upon my word I believe she's right. It doesn't do to make oneself unpopular. Just look at me for instance. I expect I hate balls a good deal more than you do, and no one has paid me such a compliment as to say that she would go to Instowe for the pleasure of meeting me; but I shall be there just the same."

In presence of so bright an example Mark could no longer hesitate. He signified his willingness to do all that might be required of him, and accepted with thanks Morton's kind offer of a seat in Mr. Bligh's brougham; and after his visitor had left him he laughed unrestrainedly for several minutes. All this was certainly a little comical. Morton's designs were simple and explicable enough; but what in the world did a young and beautiful heiress mean by throwing herself at his head? During the whole of his career, which, in a social sense, had been tolerably eventful, he had had no such experience; and not unnaturally Cicely sank in his estimation by reason of her supposed importunity. He

was, of course, willing enough to marry her, if it came to that, but he was not sure that it would not be a great bore to have to make love to her. His sentiments, in short, were precisely what those of the writer and reader of these words would probably be under similar circumstances; and if the statement of them makes him appear somewhat of a coxcomb, allowance may perhaps be made for him in consideration of his complete misunderstanding of the case. This was, at any rate, the very last time that any such misconception came within the range of his capacities.

For although, when the proper time arrived, he duly carried out his share of the compact, and was conducted by Morton Bligh to the scene of festivity, Miss Bligh did not see fit to fulfil hers, except in so far as that she was present in the ball-room on his entrance. She seemed quite surprised when he asked her how many dances she could spare him.

"I am very sorry," she answered, "but my card is more than full, and as it is I shall have to throw a good many people over most likely, because I don't think I can stay till the end. But I shall be very glad to introduce you to partners, if you are in want of them."

Mark smilingly declined and fell back, with a distinct feeling of mortification. He had not expected to be so snubbed, nor did he in the least believe, what was nevertheless perfectly true, that Cicely's programme could have been filled up so early in the evening. To be a beauty in London or Paris, or any other large city, is to be one of a certain number of happy and distinguished persons; but to be the beauty of an English county is very generally to shine supreme and alone, and, since it is human to be gregarious, Cicely's admirers numbered just as many young men as there were in the room. Moreover, it was a matter of almost absolute indifference to her whether she danced with A or B; so she had promised three dances in advance to her cousin, and had willingly accorded as many to Bobby Dare, who had rushed forward to implore them immediately upon her arrival.

Mark leant against the wall and watched her, after quieting his conscience by walking through a set of Lancers with the eldest Miss Dare. Her frock was very well cut, he noticed—assuredly it was not the handiwork of a provincial dressmaker—and as for her beauty, that was what he had never thought of disputing. Only, somehow or other, it attracted him to-

night, which it could scarcely be said to have done heretofore. After her very plain invitation to him, he could only account for her behaviour upon the supposition that she was either capricious or a coquette, and the uncertainty stimulated his curiosity.

In reality she was quite as much disappointed as he was that her engagements did not permit of her dancing with him, and she also thought him rather tiresome for having been so dilatory about presenting himself. But upon further consideration she remembered that the delay was probably rather Morton's fault than his; so that it seemed a little unfair to make him suffer for it. Consulting her programme she found that she had promised the fourteenth dance to Archie and the fifteenth to Bobby; and, with that unscrupulousness which all women, unhappily, are wont to exhibit in their dealings with those whom they have brought into subjection, she determined to ask each of them to let her off. She used no deception in the matter: she told them both candidly that she wished to dance with Mr. Chetwode, and that she relied upon their good-nature to enable her to do as she wished. And having been granted the release, which could hardly be refused, she requested her partner to conduct her to Mr. Chetwode,

whom she informed that, after all, she could manage to give him numbers fourteen and fifteen, if he cared to have them.

"You are very kind," he replied, with that deferential, un-English bow of his. "I was thinking of going away; but now I shall most thankfully remain. I only wish I could flatter myself that, as a partner, I should prove worthy of you."

He danced, as many Russians do, after the German fashion—that is to say, admirably in respect of time and smoothness, yet with a manner of holding himself and his partner which was a little uncomfortable to a lady who had never been out of England. Perhaps it was because she did not get on with him quite as well as she had expected, perhaps it was (as she alleged) because the evening was far advanced and she was tired out, but more probably it was because she desired to test his conversational rather than his waltzing powers that Cicely proposed to sit out the remainder of the time at her disposal. At all events, she obtained his assent, of which she lost no time in taking advantage. Hitherto, this man had baffled her; and to be baffled was an altogether novel experience for Miss Bligh. She put forth all her powers, which were very great (is not

the power of any young and beautiful woman enormous ?), to break down the barrier of his polite reserve, and it need scarcely be said that she was successful. She made him talk about himself; she led him on to speak of subjects which he was not in the habit of discussing; she did not, it is true, hear anything about Madame Souravieff—because one must draw the line somewhere—but she learnt that Mr. Chetwode was a weary and unhappy man, that he had lost all his illusions and did not know where to find fresh ones; also that sympathy was very pleasant and very welcome to him.

And he, for his part, was perfectly sincere. He not only seemed to be fascinated, but really was fascinated. Being no fool, he very soon perceived that Cicely was neither in love with him nor anxious to make him fall in love with her. He had never met a woman at all like her before—had never, indeed, had the chance of so doing—and her combination of audacity and innocence touched some chord or other in his heart which through the whole of his previous life had remained intact. It was with quite spontaneous honesty that he paid her a very pretty compliment at length.

"You understand a great deal," he said. "How is

it that you have come to understand so much without ever leaving Abbotsport?"

"What is the difference between Abbotsport and other places?" she asked, laughing.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose you are right; it is always the same story over and over again; only sometimes it is printed in big type and sometimes in small. Still one does not meet every day with a person whose eyes are clear enough to read the small type. And is that enough for you? Will you have philosophy enough to live always contentedly in a microcosm?"

"If that were to be my fate I don't think I should complain of it," answered Cicely; "but it is not at all likely to be my fate."

"Doesn't one's fate very much depend upon oneself?"

"Yours may, and I daresay it does; but mine will be settled for me by other people. Here comes Bobby, looking very sad and reproachful; I must go and dance with him, poor boy! And you can go home to bed, as I see that you are dying to do. Take the brougham, if you want it; we will make room for Morton, and put Archie up on the box."

But Mark, instead of going home, remained where he was for a time, and watched her while she danced. "It is not going to be such a simple affair after all," he thought to himself. Indeed, there were several reasons why the line of action upon which he had resolved seemed less easy to carry out than it had at first appeared. To begin with, he had discovered that Miss Bligh's intelligence was above the average; then he suspected that although, like most women, she coveted admiration, her head was not likely to be turned by it; finally—and this was most serious of all—his own head was no longer as cool as he could have wished it to be. He was conscious of certain once familiar sensations, from the recurrence of which he had believed himself to be permanently delivered; he was conscious, too, of a decided loss of self-confidence and increase of anxiety. "No, it isn't going to be simple," he repeated, as he rose and made for the door. "However, that will, at least, make it more interesting."

CHAPTER XIII.

BOBBY IS PUT OUT OF SUSPENSE

WHILE Cicely was producing the impression above mentioned upon Mark Chetwode, while Archie from a distant point of vantage was glaring at the unconscious couple, and while the remainder of the assembled company were, it may be hoped, enjoying themselves after their several fashions, Bobby Dare was in a condition of tumultuous mental excitement. That very evening—so he had determined—he was to hear whether life thenceforth should mean for him a hopeful effort towards some realizable ideal or merely a daily round of monotonous duty. Either way, he was going to be relieved from suspense, which is always a stirring prospect. His sister Jane had patted him on the back and encouraged him very much, but that is what one's sister Jane may generally be relied upon to do; and if one be a sensible man, like Bobby, one makes allowance for her partiality while duly appreciating it, and

is not specially elated by her sanguine anticipations. Bobby was very far from being sanguine, yet he was glad, as every brave man ought to be, that the time for decisive action had arrived; and so, after he had danced with Cicely for a minute or two, he asked her whether she would mind coming with him into the library. "Because," said he, "I want to tell you something."

"I shall be delighted," she answered, unhesitatingly. "I have had more than enough dancing for one night, and if you can tell me anything of a nature to amuse or interest me I shall be truly grateful."

The library was deserted, and in the way of illumination had but two shaded lamps (a concession to modern social requirements which Lady Dare had only sanctioned after a struggle). the bay windows had been thrown open, and beside one of them was an armchair, of which Cicely promptly took possession.

"Well," said she, as soon as Bobby had seated himself, with his elbows on his knees, upon an old-fashioned stool in front of her, "speak on. I am accustomed to receiving confidences; nobody gets more of them than I do, and if I were not so discreet I could tell you all the domestic secrets of Abbotsport. What is your particular trouble? Have you been falling desperately

in love with somebody, after the manner of sailors? And has she snubbed you?"

Perhaps this was rather a cruel speech; but then it must be apparent to everybody that there are occasions upon which one is cruel only to be kind. Bobby neither took the hint nor resented it.

"First of all," he answered, "I wanted to tell you that I've been appointed to the *Cygnet*, and that I shall have to join in a few days."

"It is very ignorant of me, but I really don't know whether I ought to congratulate you or not. Where is the *Cygnet?* And what is she going to do?"

"Oh, it's a matter for congratulation, I think. I shall be on the East India Station—in the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea, most likely—and one might be worse off than that. There's always the chance of active service in putting down the slave trade, you see. But what I have made up my mind to say to you to-night—because I'm sure it's better to say it and have done with it—is that whatever happens to me in the future will be good or bad or indifferent, just as you may decide."

Cicely assumed an air of astonishment which she did not feel.

"I don't understand how that can be," she declared.

"But of course you do understand," returned Bobby, who was a very straightforward young man. "You understand quite well, Cicely, that I love you, and that I have never loved any one but you. I haven't said so before, but you knew it without my saying so; and now I want you to tell me honestly whether it's an altogether hopeless business or not. I can do with a very little bit of hope," he added, modestly, "if you can give it me."

Cicely burst out laughing. Her laughter might have struck a dispassionate observer as being a trifle forced, but it would have been most unreasonable to expect of a matter-of-fact and amorous young sailor that he should be in a position to make dispassionate observations.

"My dear Bobby," she exclaimed, "you are very flattering, but you are a little bit absurd, you know. Didn't I tell you you were in love with somebody? Well, by this time next year you will be in love with somebody else, that's all. And then, if there's any gratitude in you, you will be thankful to me, I hope, for not having taken you too seriously."

"That isn't a fair way to answer me, Cicely. You

may refuse me, and I suppose you will; but you aren't heartless enough to laugh at me, and you needn't pretend that you are. I know you better than that."

Cicely was a little surprised, and showed she was so by a change in her voice.

"But, Bobby," she remonstrated, "how would you have me answer you? You are only a boy."

"So you say; still the fact remains that I am a man. If you tell me that you don't care for me, and never can care for me, there's an end of it; only I'm sure you can't think me absurd. It wasn't absurd to love you. It may be presumptuous perhaps; that I quite admit."

If he had been as clever as he was stupid, and as designing as he was honest, he could not have put the case more effectively; for he touched Cicely's heart and made her feel ashamed of herself. Nevertheless, she shook her head.

"I am very sorry, Bobby," she said, "but you mustn't think about it any more. I hope you won't think about it any more—or, at any rate, not for long. You oughtn't to call me heartless because I can't help remembering how young you are. You haven't seen a great many women yet, have you? And just think what a dreadful thing it would be to be bound to one,

and then to find that there was another whom you liked better."

"I daresay it would be dreadful if it were possible," answered Bobby; "only in my case it isn't possible. However, I suppose you mean me to understand that there's no chance for me?"

Cicely, by silence, signified assent. The moon, which was nearly at the full, shone in through the open window, and fell upon the features of the handsome, dejected-looking young fellow who sat facing her. She had never meant to flirt with him; she had never meant to give a moment of pain to his honest heart. Certainly she had known he was an admirer of hers; but then so many people were admirers of hers! Yet, while she looked at him, her conscience pricked her, and at length she said:

"I haven't—I hope you don't think I have—encouraged you, Bobby?"

"Oh no," he replied, with a dreary little laugh; "you cannot be accused of having done that. Only there seemed to be just the least shadow of a hope, and as I am going away for such a long time I thought I would rather hear the truth before I started; and then Jane kept on telling me that I should never get what I

wanted if I hadn't the pluck to ask for it—which was sensible enough, I daresay."

The counsels of Jane were no doubt sensible in the abstract, but it was scarcely sensible to quote them to Cicely, whose manner at once underwent a slight change.

"Oh," said she, "you have been making a *confidante* of Jane, then?"

In truth there was no great love lost between her and Miss Dare, who was strong-minded and managing, and whom she suspected (with perfect justice) of being desirous that her brother should marry a rich woman.

"I didn't exactly confide in her," answered Bobby. "She guessed what was the matter with me, and when she taxed me with it in plain terms I couldn't contradict her. So then she urged me not to put off speaking until it might be too late."

"Your sister," observed Cicely, "doesn't seem to give me credit for knowing my own mind. Did she think that it was a question of who might happen to speak first?"

"No, only she thought—— But perhaps you will be offended if I tell you what she thought."

"Perhaps I shall," answered Cicely; "but I wish to hear it, all the same. Go on."

And so accustomed was Bobby to obey this imperious young lady that he did not venture to dispute her pleasure.

"Well," he began, "I was afraid—of course I don't know whether I am right or wrong, and I mustn't ask—but for some time past I have been very much afraid of Archie. Jealous of him, in short, if I must speak the plain truth."

"Yes," said Cicely, with an unmoved countenance, for indeed this was no news to her.

Bobby looked wistfully at her for a moment, and then resumed:

"Naturally I can't help knowing that Archie is a cut above me in almost everything, except, perhaps, in sailing a boat; but Jane, you see——"

"Jane, quite as naturally, has a less humble opinion of you. So far, I am entirely with Jane. Well?"

"Well, she wouldn't allow that, on our merits, there was much difference between us; but she has an idea that your father wants you to marry Archie, and that you may do it in order to please him. I've been thinking a good deal about it since," continued Bobby, as the girl remained silent, "and it seems to me that it really is a danger. A danger for you, I mean; as for me, no

doubt I shouldn't have been any better off if Archie had never been born."

And, with a certain unstudied eloquence which was not ineffective, he proceeded to expatiate upon the fatal consequences which must necessarily result from a marriage of convenience. He declared—and his face proved his sincerity—that he cared far more for her happiness than for his own, that he could very well bear to hear that she had married a man whom she loved, and that he had always known that he himself could hardly win her love by anything short of a miracle; but to hear that from motives of expediency she had married a man whom she did not really love would, he confessed, be to him the very worst news possible, and he implored her not to sacrifice herself in so useless a way.

Cicely's response to his appeal was scarcely satisfactory to him.

"Perhaps," said she, "the simplest plan is not to marry at all. I don't think I have ever met anybody except my father whom I should care to live with always; and you are completely mistaken if you imagine that he wishes me to marry against my will."

"Perhaps he doesn't," answered Bobby, doubtfully,

"but everybody seems to think that he has set his heart upon your marrying Archie. And small blame to him if he has! Although I do trust you won't oblige him, unless—unless——"

Cicely shut up her fan with a sudden impatient rattle.

"Oh, the chances are that I shall live and die an old maid," she said. "No doubt there are plenty of women who can manage to think their husbands paragons of perfection, but I can't believe myself capable of such imbecility, and if one didn't think the man a paragon, I don't see how one could escape abhorring him. The whole question is one of imagination from beginning to end, and my imagination has always been defective."

That was probably true; and it was certainly true that she was as yet fancy free. If any one had contrived to find a soft place in her heart, that person was no other than the modest Bobby himself; but of course such an avowal could not be made without a risk of misconception.

And now this interview was brought to an abrupt close by the entrance of Archie, who marched up to the couple in a state of ill-disguised irritation, to say that he had been looking for them all over the place, that

the carriage was at the door, and that everybody was going away.

"Chetwode appears to have appropriated the brougham," he added. "Pretty cool of him, I must say. We shall have to stow Morton away somehow."

He was not much mollified when his cousin rejoined:

"That is my fault; I told Mr. Chetwode he could have the brougham. The carriage holds four, but anyhow you won't mind sitting on the box on such a lovely night, will you? I thought you would be glad to have the chance of a cigar."

Archie grunted; and while Cicely, who had risen, was making her way towards the ball-room, to say good-night to her entertainers, he muttered to Bobby:

"That brute has been swilling champagne the whole evening. If we could have got away a little sooner, there might have been some hope of his being able to behave himself; but by this time he must be as drunk as an owl. I'd put him on the box, only I suppose he'd roll off."

Morton was subsequently offered the box-seat, which he declined, with thanks. He was not drunk, but he might without much exaggeration have been called

tipsy. He was also in high spirits; for he had witnessed from a distance his sister's prolonged conversation with Mark Chetwode, and Archie's evident ill-humour struck him in the light of a capital joke. He beguiled the homeward way with some facetious sallies at the expense of Lady Dare's guests, most of which were expressed in language which shocked Miss Skipwith beyond measure, and consequently amused Cicely. The latter was in need of any amusement that she could obtain, because her own spirits were somewhat depressed. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she had not behaved very well to poor Bobby, and a still more uncomfortable feeling that he had behaved with a good deal of magnanimity to her; she could have wished also to explain to him—had it seemed possible to do that without exciting false hopes—that she was not, and never had been, in love with any man, and that she believed herself to be constitutionally incapable of such emotions. But there are things which it is always extremely difficult to say, because nobody will ever believe them; so that perhaps it was just as well for Bobby's peace of mind that his entreaties had been met by an uncompromising negative. After all he was very young, and the wounds of young people heal quickly.

Meanwhile Morton, encouraged by his aunt's deprecatory murmurs and his sister's laughter, was not mincing matters. Not a good word had he to say for a single person whom he had met that evening, except Mark Chetwode, whom he boldly averred to be the only civilized human being in the entire countryside.

"Chetwode is a gentleman," said he. "Clever fellow too—uncommonly clever fellow. Not much use for the Miss Dares to set their caps at him, I can tell them."

"Perhaps they won't," observed Cicely. "He isn't such a very great catch, you see."

"My dear girl," returned her brother, with much solemnity, "a man like Chetwode would be a catch if he hadn't a brass farthing in the world. You may take my word for that. He'll get into Parliament and distinguish himself, you'll see; he won't be content to vegetate down here all his life. I should say," continued Morton with as much gravity and deliberation as if he had known what he was talking about, "that with a little capital—of course a little capital is necessary to start with—Chetwode might rise to almost any position."

And it is highly probable that he would have proceeded to hint in plain terms at the quarter whence the requisite capital might appropriately be derived, had he not been preserved from wrecking his schemes in that way by the termination of the drive.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. BLIGH STATES HIS INTENTIONS

ONE fine morning, not long after the ball at which he had entertained his friends and acquaintances, Sir George Dare mounted his old bay horse, and lost a button off the back of his trousers in the process. This, coming on the top of other vexatious incidents, saddened him and brought gloomy ideas into his mind; so that he shook his head very mournfully as he jogged down the drive.

"It comes to this," he sighed, "that I must either give up wearing braces altogether, or have the library steps brought out every time that I want to get upon a horse's back. A pretty state of things for a man of my age, who has always led an abstemious life!"

As, however, his temperament was optimistic, and as exercise and fresh air always did him good, he presently became more cheerful, remembering that, after all, he might be a great deal worse off. There was poor Bligh,

for instance, to whom he was about to pay a neighbourly visit—Bligh, who was his junior by a long way and was a helpless cripple, simply waiting for death.

"Waiting for death," soliloquized Sir George, "that's all that can be said about him; and with no prospect of dying comfortably either; for it must be deuced unpleasant to have such a rascal of a son, and see him standing there ready to step into your shoes. Thank God, I've no cause to be ashamed of any son of mine—though I wish one of 'em wasn't such a stoopid young ass!"

Sir George, who was fond of Bobby and proud of him, would have turned purple with anger if anybody else had ventured so to describe the Benjamin of the family; but it certainly was tiresome of the boy to have abortive love affairs and bolt off to London on some flimsy pretext before his leave had expired. Bobby had departed, and the flimsy pretext alluded to had been outwardly acquiesced in; but the mishap which had befallen him was no secret to any of his near relations, because he had been unable to conceal it from Jane, and Jane had imparted it to her mother, who had told Sir George, and reticence had never been one of Sir George's many fine qualities. Not that he meant to say a word about the

matter to Bligh; that would be a very useless and undignified thing to do. Girls must be allowed to choose their own husbands, or at any rate to reject aspirants whom they may have the bad taste not to fancy, and Lady Dare was much mistaken in thinking that Cicely was the sort of girl who would submit to have a husband chosen for her.

As a matter of fact, Lady Dare did not think so; but Jane did. Jane was convinced that unless some disinterested person intervened Cicely would be talked into marrying her cousin, and Jane's conviction, which had reached her father's ears, may have had something to do with that honest gentleman's sudden anxiety to inform himself as to the state of poor Bligh's health. But if so he was quite unconscious of it. He had told Lady Dare, who had suggested the intervention of the disinterested person, that that was all stuff and nonsense, and although he had agreed with her that it would be very nice if Bobby were to make a good marriage, and had not disputed her assertion that Bobby was both handsomer and more lovable than Archie, he had at the same time reminded her that Cicely appeared to be of a different opinion.

On reaching the Priory he was informed that Mr.

Bligh was out in the garden, and there, reclining in a sheltered, sunny spot, he found the invalid, whom he greeted with much heartiness.

"Well, Bligh," said he, "it's a great pleasure to see you out of doors again, I'm sure! And how are you? Progressing, I hope—progressing, eh?"

"Oh, I'm progressing," answered Mr. Bligh, with a little laugh. "In fact I may say that I'm progressing very fast indeed—down the hill."

Sir George began to say: "Oh, nonsense, my dear fellow, you mustn't talk like that! You're all right; we shall have you about again before long." But while he was speaking he looked at the other's pale, waxen face, and suddenly felt ashamed of uttering such absurdities; so that his sentence, which had started so bravely, died away feebly before reaching its conclusion.

To relieve his embarrassment Mr. Bligh at once changed the subject, and presently made some inquiry about Bobby, which enabled Sir George to say:

"Ah, poor boy, I'm here partly on his behalf. Asked me to say good-bye to you all for him. He has been ordered off to the East India Station, you know."

"So Cicely told me," observed Mr. Bligh; "but I didn't know that he had to join his ship immediately."

"He won't have to join for a week or two, I believe; but he said he must go up to London to get his outfit. The fact of the matter is that he wanted to get away—and no fool he! *I* didn't attempt to detain him, though of course his mother was distressed."

Sir George glanced at Mr. Bligh and saw that his meaning had been understood. He did not, however, obtain much comfort or encouragement from the latter, who only smiled and remarked:

"He is one of a tolerably large number. Happily for him he is a sailor, and sailors have short memories."

"I don't know so much about that," returned Sir George, rather grumpily; "we Dares aren't weathercocks, whatever we may be. At the same time, I am quite aware—and so I told his mother—that you have other intentions. No doubt it's just as well that he should get away, poor fellow! How long do you expect your son to stay with you?"

"He hasn't spoken to me about his plans," Mr. Bligh answered, "but I should think that, under the circumstances, he would see the propriety of being in at the death. It's customary, you know; and I have been much impressed of late by Morton's earnest desire to do what is customary."

Sir George suddenly broke out into strong language. As a matter of principle, no one was more firmly convinced than he that it is both wrong and unlike a gentleman to swear; but surely it is justifiable to resort to any remedy in order to secure yourself against a fit of apoplexy, and his good friend Bligh had the knack of exasperating him beyond endurance. His observations were somewhat incoherent, but the upshot of them was that it was downright disgusting; and Mr. Bligh agreed meditatively that perhaps it was rather disgusting, when you came to think of it. The situation, however, was not of his creating, and he was at a loss to understand why he was being scolded.

Sir George said:

"Nobody is scolding you, Bligh; but if you don't want to make a man lose his temper—I believe that's just what you do want, though—you shouldn't talk in such an unnatural way."

"I thought I was suiting myself to my subject," answered Mr. Bligh, mildly. "For the matter of that, nothing that happens is unnatural. Otherwise it couldn't happen, you see."

This puzzled Sir George, who rubbed the back of his head and endeavoured to argue the point. Thus he was

led away into an irrelevant discussion, and had not yet ascertained whether the Abbotsport property was really to pass into the hands of the obnoxious Morton or not, when the colloquy was interrupted by Archie's appearance upon the scene.

That young man, who strolled up with his hands in his pockets, looked as if he didn't know what to do with himself—which indeed was his case. He said disconsolately that Cicely had gone off somewhere to visit the poor, as usual, and that Morton was asleep in the smoking-room—also as usual. After which he sat down upon the ground and heaved a profound sigh. Sir George chatted for a few minutes longer, and then took his leave, saying:

"Well, I ought to be going home or I shall be late for luncheon. Very glad to have seen you, Bligh, and —and—I hope you'll be better soon. And you must keep up your spirits, you know—you must keep up your spirits!"

"He's a good old fellow, that," remarked Archie, when the worthy baronet was out of hearing. "Did he come over here just to ask how you were?"

"He is a very good old fellow," replied Mr. Bligh, "although I don't think he came over solely for that

purpose. I believe that one of his reasons for coming was that he—or possibly Lady Dare—is very anxious to know whether I mean my son to inherit this place."

"What business is that of theirs?"

"It is to some extent their business. One can't be altogether independent of one's neighbours, and there is a certain kind of neighbour who can give one a good deal of annoyance if he chooses. However, I didn't tell Sir George what my intentions were. But I think," added Mr. Bligh, after a short pause, "that I will tell *you*, if you don't mind listening to me for a minute or two. Now that my mind is made up, I should like you to know it. Did it ever occur to you that I might put you in Morton's place?"

"No," answered the young man, looking up wonderingly, "I can't say that it ever did."

"I am glad of that; because I don't mean to commit such an act of injustice, much as I should like to commit it. If I felt free to consult my own inclinations, I should choose to be succeeded by somebody who would be content to lead the ordinary life of an English country gentleman. I have been interested in my tenants, and in the fishing people, and I have tried to do what I could for them, and the idea that my work

will be either undone or allowed to die a natural death isn't, of course, quite pleasant to me. Still I couldn't deprive Morton of his birthright. After thinking it over, that is the conclusion to which I have come. The excuse, it seems to me, would be insufficient, and I need not weary you by going into reasons and particulars. But I have thought myself justified in leaving him only a life interest in the estates, which will pass on his death to his eldest son, or, if he never has any sons, to Cicely. For you I have made such provision as it seemed right and reasonable to make. You won't be a rich man, Archie, but you will be independent—which, after all, means much the same thing."

Archie made the unintelligible mumble which is all that can be expected of a man to whom an announcement of that kind has been made, and a pause ensued. Then Mr. Bligh, who had been scrutinizing the young man with a faintly amused air, resumed:

"I wonder whether you would mind my speaking to you with brutal and unceremonious frankness?"

Archie raised his blue eyes wonderingly and answered:

"I don't mind your saying anything that you want to say, Uncle Wilfrid."

"Thank you. Well, I want to say something that may perhaps make you blush; but I will look the other way while I'm saying it. You must try to forgive an unemployed cripple for having had eyes sharp enough to perceive that you are smitten with my daughter, and maybe you will forgive me the more easily when I tell you that it has given me the greatest possible satisfaction to perceive that such is the case. If I had to choose a husband for her out of the whole world, I should choose you; and—in short, my dear fellow, I wish you good luck with all my heart."

Here Mr. Bligh held out his hand to his nephew, who took it, expressing his gratitude as warmly as a somewhat limited vocabulary would allow. He thought his uncle was treating him with very great kindness and generosity, and he said as much.

"Well, no," answered the elder man, laughing, "I'm afraid I can't claim much credit for either. You have all the personal qualities that one is entitled to ask for in a son-in-law, but, in addition to that, circumstances give you a special value in my eyes. I suppose feeling one's end so near makes one a little wanting in delicacy and inclined to say things which, as a general rule, are only hinted at, but as I have begun by being

so candid, I may as well go on. Looking to the future, I can't but be aware that Morton is not likely to marry, and that his life is not likely to be a long one. Consequently I foresee that some day my place may be taken by Cicely's husband, and it would be a comfort to me to know that Cicely's husband will be one of my own blood. I only mention this by way of explaining myself; your own good sense will tell you that it would be a very great mistake for you to count upon chances, or even upon probabilities. I trust I haven't shocked you by my cold-bloodedness."

It is not impossible that Archie might have been just the least bit in the world shocked, had he been in a calmer condition of mind; but as it was he was too excited and anxious for criticism, and what he chiefly wanted to know was whether he could at once declare himself to Cicely with any prospect of success.

"Really," said his uncle, laughing, "you ought to be a better judge of that than I. I can't, of course, do anything to help you; all I can say is that you have my best wishes."

This was, no doubt, the proper attitude to take up, and, whatever may be thought of Mr. Bligh's discretion, it cannot be said that up to that point he had used any

undue influence for the furtherance of his schemes. But later in the day he did, though without intending it, transgress to some extent the limits of strict neutrality. Cicely—as indeed was a common enough practice with her—did not put in an appearance at luncheon, but at five o'clock she found her father in the library and seated herself by his side to pour out his tea for him; and then it was that she heard the news of Bobby's precipitate departure, which seemed both to distress and anger her.

"He might at least have taken the trouble to come and say good-bye to us," she remarked.

"Taking everything into consideration," answered Mr. Bligh, with a smile, "perhaps some allowance may be made for his bad manners."

"Oh, you know, then?"

"Well, I can guess. Sir George didn't leave a great deal to my imagination, though we avoided particulars. From your guilty expression, I presume that the poor youth must have gone the length of putting a plain question and getting a plain answer."

Cicely nodded, rather sadly. She was not much given to confidences, but she had never had any secrets from her father, and she was the more willing now to tell

him what had occurred because her conscience was ill at ease. Did he, she asked, consider that she had behaved badly? Had she been to blame? Did he think that Bobby was very angry with her?

"It seems so horrid and cruel to have sent him away like this before his time; and I am afraid his people will hate me for it," she said, penitently.

Mr. Bligh, however, could not be brought to view this matter in a serious light. He was one of the most kind-hearted men in the world, but he had forgotten, or perhaps had never known, the sufferings attendant upon unrequited love, and he did not think it probable that a healthy young sailor would find much difficulty in forgetting the girl he had left behind him. These unromantic sentiments he imparted to Cicely, and was amused to notice that if they reassured her they did not altogether please her. Women may always be trusted to think kindly of a disconsolate lover; but, whatever they may say, they can't readily pardon a lover who has found consolation.

And it may be that her father's philosophical remarks produced a certain effect upon Cicely, which, to do him justice, he had not meant to produce; for when, as seemed but natural after such a conversation, he went

on to speak of other admirers of hers, and mentioned one in particular whom, if he were in her place, he should rate more highly than all the rest put together, she only shrugged her shoulders and said:

"Oh, he is very nice and I like him very much. I daresay he would do as well as anybody, if there must be somebody. But must there be somebody?"

"No," answered Mr. Bligh; "but I hope there will be somebody. You don't like me to say I sha'n't be here much longer; yet that is what I am always thinking of, and I am quite sure I should have a better chance of living for another year or so if I were easy in my mind about you."

In saying this he unquestionably went further than he ought to have done; but he conceived himself to be merely stating a fact. Nothing could have been less in accordance with his desires than that his life should be prolonged by his daughter's marriage with a man whom she did not love. His own impression was that she really did love Archie, but that she probably was not as yet aware of it. It had always been so much a matter of course that every young man who came near her should prostrate himself before her. So that there seemed to be no great harm in saying what an honest, manly

young fellow Archie was, and how straight he had always kept, although his regiment had the name of being a fast one, and what a good sportsman he had shown himself, and how well he seemed to be adapted for country life.

"I was telling him this morning," continued Mr. Bligh with a sigh, "that I would very much rather leave the Priory to him than to Morton, who will hate the place. But that can't be."

"I suppose not," said Cicely, doubtfully.

"Oh no; it wouldn't do. I hesitated for a time, but my mind is quite made up now. Morton must have the place for life, and the remainder must be to his son, supposing that he ever has a son. Happily, I can leave you a considerable sum of money without pinching him, and I have always intended to provide for Archie. Supposing that things should fall out as they may, you and he, by putting your means together, would have enough to live the sort of life that I should like to think of you as living. I mean that you could have a moderate-sized country house and a sufficiency of horses. Sometimes I have thought that possibly Upton Chetwode might suit you. But these are only a sick man's fancies," concluded Mr. Bligh, laughing. "I amuse

myself with fancies, having so little else to do. Occasionally also I torment myself; and in one of my blackest visions I see you established in a London house, with your Aunt Susan mounting guard over you. Heavens! how wretched you would be!"

Well, at any rate, this man was not selfish. Perhaps he did not know what was most likely to ensure his daughter's happiness: perhaps he did not sufficiently realize that the destiny of every individual on earth is, or ought to be, the property of that individual. All his life he had been accustomed to be a ruler, and in some measure to sway the destinies of a large number of dependents. But of himself he had thought little enough; and this was what struck Cicely, as she rose and looked down upon his somewhat wistful face.

"You are always doing things, or wanting to do things, for other people, papa," she said. "We must try to show our gratitude by pleasing ourselves, in order to please you."

Then she bent down and kissed him and left the room. There were tears in her eyes, he noticed, and he wondered why. He did not, however, imagine that they were caused by any dread of the future which he had sketched out for her.

CHAPTER XV.

MARK MAKES PEACE

Her father's avowal of his wishes did not come upon Cicely as any surprise. She had divined them some time back—in truth they had not been very carefully disguised—and although he had not been quite as explicit with her as he had been with Archie, he might have been so and yet told her little that she did not already understand. Evidently there was something more than a possibility that Morton might die without issue, and just as evidently it must have been necessary to make arrangements for the succession, in that event, of a Bligh worthy of the name. Now there was but one such man in existence besides the present owner of the property; and what could be more natural than that that owner should desire to bring about a match which in time might have the effect of restoring his daughter to the position of authority and beneficence of which his own demise

would deprive her? The match, in fact, was undoubtedly a desirable one. Cicely was able to contemplate it without repugnance, if without enthusiasm. She was not in love with Archie, but then she was not in love with anybody else, nor likely to be, and she worshipped her father. Her feeling at the moment was that if, by marrying her cousin, she could relieve her father's mind of anxiety and so prolong his life, she would not hesitate for a moment to make what, after all, could hardly be called a sacrifice. Nobody, at any rate, should suspect that it was a sacrifice. One must do these things with a good grace if one is to do them at all; and why Cicely, who was not given to weeping, should have found it necessary to dry her eyes at frequent intervals for half an hour after coming to this conclusion it would be useless to inquire, since she herself did not know. She supposed that she was crying because she hated so to talk or think about her father's death—which, to be sure, was a plausible reason enough.

When she had dressed for dinner she returned to the library, where she found an unexpected guest in conversation with her father.

"You will think that I am developing into a very obstrusive neighbour," Mark Chetwode said, as he rose

to shake hands with her, "but your brother must bear the blame. He came to see me this afternoon and insisted on bringing me back with him, though I assure you that I defended myself to the best of my power."

"Didn't you want to come, then?" asked Cicely, laughing.

"Ah, that is a question which requires no answer. But I know that in England a man who presents himself at the dinner-hour without an invitation takes a very great liberty. In Russia it is different."

"My dear sir, didn't I invite you?" called out Morton from the armchair in which he was lounging at the other end of the room. "Let it be supposed that we are Russians, if that will make you any happier."

"Mr. Chetwode will be good enough to suppose nothing of the kind," returned Cicely. "We are English, and so is he: and if he were anything else he wouldn't be half as welcome as he is, I can tell him."

In point of fact, his presence was particularly welcome to her that evening; because, after what had passed between her and her father, she was conscious of a novel and not very agreeable sensation of embarrassment which prevented her from talking to Archie with her accustomed freedom. Her father, she was aware, had

been making confidential statements to Archie as well as to her, and it was more than probable that he had received confidential statements in return. Under the circumstances, it was a relief to have to exert oneself for the entertainment of an outsider.

No great exertion, however, was required in order to entertain Mr. Chetwode upon this occasion. It was rather he who exerted himself, and when he chose to exert himself he could be very pleasant company. Without seeming to take any trouble about it (though of course such a thing can't be done without a good deal of trouble), he contrived to draw everybody round the dinner-table into a conversation which he turned hither and thither as he pleased. What was more, he managed to put them all upon pretty good terms with themselves, and consequently with him. Meanwhile he kept his faculties of observation on the alert and made a few trifling discoveries. It did not take him long to detect Archie's subdued excitement and Cicely's somewhat forced gaiety, nor was he slow to note the circumstance that Mr. Bligh's eyes kept wandering from his daughter to his nephew and back again. But these things were far from disquieting him. The first act of the little domestic drama was drawing towards a close,

he thought, and its conclusion would clear the ground. Obviously the nephew, strongly supported by the uncle, was about to make his proposal; obviously, too, he was about to be rejected: for Mark was convinced that Cicely's affection for her cousin was of a pure cousinly nature. He, for his part, therefore, had at present nothing to do but to bide his time and make himself unobtrusively agreeable.

"My dear," said Miss Skipwith to Cicely, when the two ladies had returned to the drawing-room, a vast apartment which was seldom occupied at any other hour of the day, "I don't, as you know, pretend to any great insight into character, but it does seem to me that Mr. Chetwode is a most remarkable man."

"Very remarkable," agreed Cicely, who was not thinking about Mr. Chetwode at the moment.

"He has so much more information than most of the young men whom one meets nowadays; and then his manners are so very superior to theirs! To be sure it is no great compliment to him to say that; because some of them really have no manners at all. Look at your cousin Archie, for instance. I daresay he doesn't mean to be rude, but he has a way of yawning under one's very nose which I can't think gentleman-like; and,

to my mind, he is not nearly careful enough about the language that he uses in the presence of ladies."

"Has he been saying anything indecent?" asked Cicely, absently.

"My *dear* Cicely! Of course I only meant that he was too much given to slang expressions. Mr. Chetwode, if you have noticed, never interlards his conversation with slang. Mr. Chetwode, in short," concluded Miss Skipwith, emphatically, "is a thorough gentleman."

"The inference," observed Cicely, "is flattering to us all. If Archie isn't a gentleman I suppose the rest of us must be snobs; for there's no getting over the fact that his blood is the same as ours."

"It is not altogether a question of blood, my dear; and I am sure that I never denied that your cousin was a gentleman. One may disapprove of a person notwithstanding his being a gentleman by birth."

That Miss Skipwith disapproved of Archie was an old story, and her motives for so doing were no secret to her niece: but when, encouraged by the latter's silence, the old lady went on to say that no true gentleman was scheming or self-seeking, that greed of money was peculiarly repellent in the young, and a good deal more to the like effect, Cicely grew a little impatient.

"If I wanted to create a prejudice against any one, I should not set to work in your way, Aunt Susan," she remarked. "One can hardly expect to succeed unless one can hit upon some charges which have at least a faint show of probability about them. But of course you're not a good calumniator, you poor old Aunt Susan," she added, softening at the sight of Miss Skipwith's conscience-stricken countenance; "how should you be? And you're quite wrong about Archie—if that matters."

So saying she moved towards the piano, by way of closing the conversation, while Miss Skipwith sighed heavily.

In the dining-room things were not going on quite so smoothly as they had done before the departure of the ladies. As soon as the men were left to themselves Mr. Bligh apologized to his guest, and requested his son to do the honours for him. He had had a rather tiring day, he said, and felt quite worn out.

"I daresay Mr. Chetwode will kindly excuse my lack of ceremony in consideration of my infirmity."

So his servant was rung for, and presently he was wheeled away.

"Breaking up fast," remarked Morton, laconically, after the door had closed.

"Oh, I hope not," said Mark, wishing to be polite.

Mr. Bligh's heir-apparent laughed rather disagreeably.

"No amount of hoping will keep the governor alive much longer," answered he; "and as far as that goes I shouldn't think he himself cared about living. What's the use of remaining alive when you've lost the use of your legs? You're only a burden to yourself and to others."

Archie cracked a walnut with unnecessary noise, threw the crackers down upon the table, and muttered something under his breath.

"I beg your pardon," said Morton, turning round upon him at once with a deferential smile; "did you make a remark?"

"Yes," answered Archie, "I made a remark. But perhaps I had better not repeat it."

Mark hastily threw himself into the breach with some question about the vintage of the claret they were drinking; but Morton, who may have been a little under the influence of that excellent wine, or may have been determined to exasperate his cousin—possibly both causes were at work—did not choose to be put to silence.

"I always think," said he, throwing himself back in

his chair, and nursing his leg comfortably, "that the humbug of everyday life is the most gratuitous of the many miseries which we are in the habit of inflicting upon ourselves in this country. It serves absolutely no purpose, because nobody is deceived by it; it makes political speeches intolerably dull and leading articles simply unreadable. One must forgive lawyers and parsons and diplomatists, because it's their trade to say what they don't think, and their bread-and-butter depends upon it; but why the deuce shouldn't the rest of us acknowledge what we can't conceal? In my own humble way I endeavour to do so; and when a man is palpably dying I don't pretend to think that he will live for another twenty years."

Mark tried to give the discussion an academical turn, and for a short space of time he was successful. He could not, however, do the whole of the talking himself, and so Morton soon found an opportunity of harking back to the original subject.

"Family affection," said he, "may be a very pretty thing where it exists; but where it doesn't exist, and where everybody knows that it doesn't, one merely behaves like a fool by making a show of it. When a man stands between me and a fortune, and when he

happens to be afflicted with an incurable disease into the bargain, I confess that nothing seems to me more desirable than his removal to a happier sphere."

This was too much for Archie, who exclaimed:

"I believe you're the only man in England, Morton, who would say such a thing as that about his father in his father's house!"

"In all probability I am," agreed Morton, imperturbably; "that is just what I modestly venture to pride myself upon. You'll admit that I'm not the only man in England who holds such views; my peculiarity consists in my expressing them. And, mind you, I shouldn't for a moment hesitate to express them to the governor himself."

"Even you would hardly be such a blackguard as that!" cried Archie, hotly.

If Morton's object had been to make a short-tempered young man angry, he had attained it; but his own temper, though of a very different order, was not in the least under his control, and for all his love of plain language, it did not please him to hear himself called a blackguard. He shot a singularly malevolent glance across the table at his cousin as he said:

"All the same, you are quite as anxious as I am—a

little more anxious, perhaps—to hear the governor's will read. You have done your best, in your rather clumsy way, to cut me out; but I shouldn't wonder if you were to meet with a disappointment after all. Toadying doesn't always pay."

"I can't submit to such a gross insult as that from any man," Archie declared, jumping up. "You must apologize for it at once, or either you or I must leave the house."

"A more appalling threat I never heard," chuckled Morton. "It will be painful to lose you; but I am afraid we must make up our minds to the loss, because I don't intend to go, and I certainly don't intend to apologize."

At this juncture Mark the pacificator thought it high time to intervene.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," said he, with a certain air of authority, "but you are both very much in the wrong. You have both said things which you do not really mean, and which I am sure you will see that you ought to retract."

Each of the disputants shook his head decisively, but Mark took no notice of that. He proceeded to point out that in a country like England, where the satisfac-

tion which would be promptly demanded and granted elsewhere has been done away with by common consent, opprobrious epithets are clearly inadmissible. Then, with some adroitness, he observed that Morton could not actually believe in the very offensive charge which he had brought against his cousin, or he never would have put it into words. When one is apprehensive of being supplanted, one does not carefully put one's possible supplanter in the right and oneself in the wrong.

"Of course," he added, "I know nothing of Mr. Bligh's intentions and very little of his ethical standard; but I know that if I had a son who had forced a guest of mine to leave my house by insulting him, I should feel that I owed every reparation to my guest and the sharpest punishment I could inflict to my son."

By the time that he had finished his harangue he had made one of the men ashamed of himself and had frightened the other; and so the incident terminated with a somewhat grudging exchange of apologies. The cousins, it need scarcely be said, were no better friends than they had been before; but they perceived the expediency of adjourning their quarrel. Morton went straight off to the smoking-room, while the other two

joined Miss Skipwith and Cicely; and as the latter was still seated at the piano, Mark contrived to exchange a few words with her in private, under cover of the resonant chords which she continued to strike upon that instrument.

"If you are not careful there will be bloodshed in this house," said he, laughingly. "I have patched up a peace for to-night; but I do not answer for the future."

Cicely looked alarmed.

"Have Morton and Archie fallen out?" she asked, anxiously.

"Very much so. At home—in Russia, I mean—I could have done nothing; matters went too far. As it was I induced them to shake hands: *quittes a recommencer*."

"They must not be allowed to quarrel!" exclaimed Cicely. "It would distress papa beyond everything; and there is really no reason why they should quarrel."

"As for that, of course I do not know; but I doubt whether they can be kept within bounds unless they are held back by strong hands. Could you, do you think, restrain your cousin? For your brother"—here Mark could not repress a look of contempt, which Cicely

saw without resenting—"I really believe that I may venture to make myself responsible."

Now this was very kind of Mr. Chetwode, and Cicely felt proportionately grateful to him. She endeavoured to express her thanks, but had not much time for doing so, because Miss Skipwith and Archie, who had nothing to say to one another, very soon interrupted her. Mark, however, went away very well satisfied with his evening's work. He had somewhat strengthened his hold over Morton, he had averted, what might have been a little dangerous, the elevation of Archie to the rank of an aggrieved person, and, best of all, he had established something like a secret understanding with Miss Bligh.

CHAPTER XVI.

ARCHIE'S TRIUMPH

WHILE Cicely was dressing on the following morning she made up her mind to give her cousin a lecture. Although she had been a good deal distressed at hearing that the dining-room had so nearly been made the scene of an unseemly brawl, Archie's foolish behaviour had at least had the effect of making her more comfortable in one respect, inasmuch as it had relieved her of the unwonted feeling of shyness in his presence with which she had been afflicted the night before. In her heart she rather liked him for attacking Morton, who, she was sure, had deserved it; still he must certainly be lectured.

So, as soon as breakfast was over, she followed him into the conservatory, whither he had betaken himself with a cigarette and a handful of letters, and drawing a wicker chair up to his side, seated herself upon it with an air of stern resolution.

"Archie," said she, "I am sorry to find that you can't keep your word—or your temper either!"

Archie raised a somewhat troubled countenance from his correspondence.

"Has that beast, Morton, been telling you anything?" he asked.

"No, 'that beast, Morton,' has kept his own counsel. It was Mr. Chetwode who told me that he had to drag you apart. Now, you know, Archie, you promised me that you wouldn't quarrel with Morton."

"I don't think I quite promised that, did I? I said I wouldn't quarrel with him if I could help it, and goodness knows I have tried hard enough to help it! But there must be limits to everybody's patience and meekness. You don't know what things that fellow says."

"Why will you never understand that it doesn't signify what he says?"

"I can't help feeling that it does signify a little to me when he tells me that I have done my very best to cut him out of his inheritance, and that I came down here on purpose to 'toady' Uncle Wilfrid."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes, 'toady' was the very word that he used. Ought I to have bowed and held my tongue?"

"Well—it isn't true, you see; and he only said it to enrage you, not because he believed it."

"So Chetwode seemed to think; but I don't know that one ought to be expected to submit to an insult just because it is a palpable lie. However, I had told him a few minutes before that he was a blackguard—which he is—so that I had to some extent put myself in the wrong, and we ended by burying the hatchet."

"I am afraid you buried it in some place where it can very easily be scratched up again. I don't feel that I have much right to scold you, Archie, because you certainly have been patient upon the whole, and you have had a good deal to put up with; but will you waive your rights and be patient a little longer, for papa's sake and mine?"

The young man's face brightened up wonderfully at this appeal.

"Of course, I will," he answered. "I'm not very good-tempered, I'm sorry to say, and sometimes I feel as if it would be a righteous deed to catch Morton by the throat and choke him. But I won't choke him, or even tell him what I think of him again. After all, if he becomes unbearable one can always go out of the room. Besides," he added, with a sigh and a change of

tone, "I sha'n't have many more chances of giving trouble, for I have just had orders to join at Aldershot on Friday, instead of a fortnight hence as I expected. It's a horrid bore."

"Will you think me very unkind if I say that I am glad?" asked Cicely.

"When Morton came you begged me not to leave you alone with him," Archie remarked, rather reproachfully.

"Yes, because I didn't think then that he would stay long; but now I don't see any prospect of getting rid of him, and though I quite believe that you will try your best to be forbearing, it isn't pleasant for you or me or anybody to go on as we have been doing lately. As it is, we'll manage to enjoy ourselves during your last few days. Now I must be off, or I shall get behindhand with all my morning's duties."

On her way through the hall she encountered Morton, to whom she thought it might be as well to impart the news of Archie's imminent departure, and who heard it with a satisfaction which he made no attempt to disguise. Morton, as it happened, had that morning received an urgent summons to London, where certain private affairs of his, which have nothing to do with this narrative,

demanded his attention; but he had almost decided to let these affairs look after themselves as best they could, because he did not like the idea of leaving the enemy in possession of the field. Now, however, the case was altered. Archie might, it was true, offer himself to Cicely in the course of the next day or two; but that he could not, under any circumstances, have prevented him from doing, and it was needless to keep strict watch and ward over a man who would so soon be out of the way. When once he was gone, time would be upon the side of Cicely's affectionate brother and Mark Chetwode.

Morton therefore said:

"I find I shall have to run up to London myself this afternoon. Only for three days, though; so you needn't shed tears. Let me see, this is Thursday, and I promised to dine with Chetwode on Monday. I think I could just manage to get through what I have to do by Monday evening, and I can drive straight to Upton Chetwode from the station. By the way, if you're going to the back regions you might tell somebody that I shall want the brougham at three o'clock sharp."

At luncheon, when the whole party met, Morton was in high good-humour and charmingly affable with everybody, actually offering to charge himself with any

commissions that his aunt might desire to have executed in London. So pleased was he to notice that Cicely's spirits had been in no way depressed by the intelligence which had exhilarated his own, that he announced his intention of buying her a birthday present.

"I don't know when your birthday is, but as I probably forgot it last year and the year before, I have some arrears to make up."

Even for Archie he had a word or two of sour-sweet civility.

"Going back to your regiment, I hear. Well, I should think you will find Aldershot rather livelier than Abbotsport. Sorry we haven't been able to make your stay pleasanter; but our resources are limited, as you know. We'll try to do better if you look us up next winter. I suppose you'll hardly get leave again before then?"

With a truly heroic effort, Archie summoned up a distorted smile, which nearly upset Cicely's gravity, and grunted out "Thanks." To be spoken to as though he had been Morton's guest and to receive Morton's apologies for the dulness of the Priory was indeed hard to bear. However, the man was going, and he had three happy days to look forward to; at least, he hoped

they would be happy, and in his anxiety to make them so it seemed to him wisest to put off to the last hour the momentous question upon which the happiness of his future life must depend.

But when Morton had been whirled away in the brougham, and when Cicely, of her own accord, invited him to walk with her as far as the gamekeeper's cottage, where she had a sick child to visit, he felt so much encouraged that he began to reconsider that decision. After all, she already knew that he loved her; would it not be better to tell her so plainly, instead of to keep hinting at it? To be at once accepted was more than he hoped for; he would be quite satisfied with an admission that he need not altogether despair. No sooner, therefore, had he and his companion reached the outskirts of the woods through which their path lay than he drew a long breath and plunged head first into a subject to which he had made several futile attempts to lead up.

"You said, this morning," he began, rather hoarsely, "that we would enjoy ourselves during my last few days here. There is only one thing that can make me enjoy myself now, and I needn't tell you what that is. Can you give it me, Cicely?"

The girl stood still, looking at him seriously and with a sort of kindly compassion.

"I don't know," she answered; "it depends upon how much you ask for."

"Oh, I only ask for very little," he declared, eagerly. "If you will but give me leave to hope that perhaps, some day, you may care for me a tenth part as much as I care for you, that shall be enough."

And gaining courage, now that he was fairly under way, he launched forth into fervent protestations which, like all words that come straight from the heart, had a certain effect of eloquence, but of which it would scarcely be fair to give a *verbatim* report.

When he paused, Cicely, who had resumed her walk, held out her hand to him and said, in a far humbler tone than was usual with her:

"Thank you, Archie; any woman might be proud to be loved by you, and I know very well how little I deserve to be loved in that way; but I suppose one's deserts haven't much to say to such questions. Now I want to tell you the exact truth. I wish I loved you as you love me; but I don't."

"Of course you don't!" interrupted Archie. "I

never dreamt of such a thing; I shall be more than content if you can care for me the least little bit."

"I care a great deal," Cicely answered; "but perhaps a great deal isn't enough. I don't think it is in my nature to fall desperately in love with anybody, and in many ways I seem to myself to be cut out for an old maid. But I know that nothing could make papa happier than to hear that we were engaged, and if we were married I think I could promise to be a good wife to you. It isn't as if I liked any one else better," she added, almost deprecatingly.

Archie had never anticipated being met in such a spirit as that. He was overjoyed, and could only stammer out incoherent phrases of delight and gratitude.

"But, Cicely," he broke off suddenly, "will you be happy with me? That is the question."

She shook her head.

"No," she answered, with a calmer insight into the future than he could as yet attain to, "that isn't the question. The question is whether you will be happy with me. What satisfies you now may not satisfy you always: you may think that if I am not in love with you at this moment I shall be before long—and then you may be disappointed."

Of course that was just what he did think, and most people would have told him that, under the circumstances, he was fully justified in so thinking. A man when he is in love is aware of the fact; but it is said—truly or untruly—that women are often unconscious of their own sentiments, and there is also an impression, so general that it can hardly be altogether devoid of foundation, to the effect that in nine cases out of ten a wife will end by loving her husband unless he treats her badly. Archie, however, as was but natural, disclaimed such ambitious aspirations. He was willing and thankful to take all risks, he declared, and it was quite impossible that he could incur any disappointments.

Well, whatever the future might have in store for him he had not much to complain of in the present. Cicely had no idea of doing things by halves, and since Archie was to be her husband, it was her duty, she thought, to please him. Her efforts in that direction were quite successful and met with their reward; because in pleasing him she also to some extent pleased herself. It is, no doubt, pleasant to be adored. Besides, she was really very fond of Archie.

The gamekeeper's little daughter was in luck that afternoon; for not only did she receive a visit from

Miss Cicely (whom she loved, yet of whom she was considerably in awe), but after a time a very nice gentleman, who had been waiting about in the garden, stepped in, cracked some excellent jokes, and, on leaving, slipped nothing less than a golden sovereign into her small palm! Indeed it is well that that did not happen to be one of Cicely's days for going the round of Abbotsport, otherwise it is to be feared that night would have fallen upon some distressing scenes of intemperance.

When one is exceptionally happy it is only human that one should wish to give others a chance of being happy too, if they can manage it; but one can't expect everybody to drink one's health, and Miss Skipwith was very much disinclined to pay Archie that compliment on being requested to do so, the same evening, by her brother-in-law. Miss Skipwith could not but feel that Cicely was throwing herself away sadly; added to which the triumph of Archie was very bitter to her. When Mr. Bligh, in the exuberance of his satisfaction, proposed the above toast after dinner, the old lady raised her glass to her lips and set it down again with its contents undiminished. She became, however, a little more reconciled to the engagement when she was sub-

sequently informed that Archie's triumph was not quite of the kind that she had imagined, and that it was not in contemplation to make him inheritor of his uncle's estates. That was satisfactory in so far as it served to clear his character; but it was melancholy to think that Morton, not Cicely, was destined to reign at the Priory, and she could not resist saying as much to her informant, who answered:

"I am quite of your opinion, Susan; it is melancholy. Nevertheless it is inevitable; so we may as well put a bright face upon it."

When Mr. Bligh spoke in that tone of voice his sister-in-law always succumbed. He was a man who, as regarded trifles, preferred giving in to being worried, so that she not unfrequently found it to be her duty to worry him; but in matters of more importance he took his own way, and had a quiet and convincing fashion of letting those about him understand that he meant to do so. Miss Skipwith, therefore, endeavoured to put on a bright face, which feat was the more easy of accomplishment because Cicely's face was so bright. The main thing, after all, was that Cicely should be happy.

And happy Cicely certainly appeared to be. During the next three days she rode, walked and talked with

Archie continually, and did not weary of his company. No doubt she saw him at his best, which she had not always done of late; but after making all deductions the fact remained that he was, as she had told him, a man of whose love any woman might be proud, and she did not regret her choice. Once or twice, to be sure, she thought with a pang of poor Bobby; but perhaps Bobby would not hear of her engagement before he had reached his tropical destination, and by that time his wound would probably have healed. The engagement, it was agreed, was not to be formally announced as yet, nor was any date fixed for the marriage.

"I can't leave papa with only Aunt Susan to attend him," Cicely said; and Archie acquiesced. It was only too plain that the delay stipulated for was not likely to be a very long one.

Mr. Bligh, for his part, was in no hurry to get rid of his daughter, and thought it as well that the young man should return to duty for a time. He wished him, however, to send in his papers before his marriage, and this Archie expressed his willingness to do. Indeed, when the day came for his departure he felt very much inclined to send them in forthwith.

"I beg you will do no such thing!" said Cicely,

laughing. "Have you forgotten that Morton comes back to-night?"

"I'm not afraid of him," answered Archie.

"Perhaps not; but I am. At least I should be in perpetual terror of your devouring one another if you were both living in the house. No, I should prefer your remaining at Aldershot until he has accustomed his mind to the idea that you will be his brother-in-law some day. It's a merciful thing that you will have left before he arrives."

"I suppose I had better go up by the three-thirty train," observed Archie, ruefully.

"That depends upon whether you want to be at Aldershot this evening or not. If not, you might stay until after dinner; because Morton is going to dine at Upton Chetwode and intends to dress there, so that there is not much fear of his appearance here before the coast is clear!"

Archie jumped at this reprieve as eagerly as if he had been a school-boy on the last day of the holidays. He was, in truth, very like a school-boy in more ways than one, and that perhaps was what had won him the place which he held in Cicely's heart; for she always got on best with those whom she could patronize a

little. His talk, when he was happy and at his ease, was of that artlessly selfish kind which no one, surely, can help enjoying. He would chatter away by the hour about his brother officers and the exceedingly humorous practical jokes which they were wont to play upon one another, and about polo and tent-pegging and pig-sticking and other enlivenments of Indian military life, while Cicely encouraged him by her questions. Perhaps one reason why she never wearied of hearing him dilate upon these themes was that the discussion of them prevented him from being too affectionate.

"Would there be any harm," he asked her, "in telling the fellows that I am engaged to be married? It's so difficult to keep a thing of that sort to oneself!"

"By all means tell them, if you like," answered Cicely, laughing; "there is no occasion to make a secret of it. Only I hope you won't bore them by dwelling too much upon the perfections of your betrothed."

"Oh, *they* won't mind," Archie declared, reassuringly. "Especially if they know that I shall leave the regiment when I marry. Of course we don't care about having many married men."

"And aren't you afraid that you will miss your

friends, and polo, and all the rest of it, when you settle down to a humdrum country life?"

He made the reply which might have been anticipated. Life with her on a desert island would be a thousand times better than life anywhere without her; but life in the neighbourhood of Abbotsport would be simply the realization of his wildest dreams.

"And even if we did find it slow—which is impossible—we could have people down to stay with us. One can always get heaps of men to come, by offering them a little shooting or hunting."

"Well, let us hope so," said Cicely. "Papa thinks Upton Chetwode would do for us. We could certainly get a lease of the place, and perhaps Mr. Chetwode might be persuaded to sell. Papa means to sound him upon the subject, and if he is successful he says he will make us a wedding present of it. It's a dear old house; it only wants a little outlay to be made charming."

This conversation took place during the last few minutes of Archie's stay at the Priory. It was a fine moonlight night, and as the dog-cart had come round rather early, he had sent the groom on with his luggage, saying that he would walk to the station by

the short cut across the fields. Cicely had accompanied him to the end of the garden, and they were now standing beside a little iron gate which divided it from the park.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young fellow, "how awfully good Uncle Wilfrid is! It seems to me that I am just about the luckiest beggar in the whole world!"

"If you think so," Cicely answered, smiling, "that is the same thing as being so, I suppose."

Then she cut short his *adieux*, over which he was inclined to linger, telling him that he would have to put his best leg foremost if he didn't want to miss the train. She watched his tall, lithe figure as he strode across the grass in the moonlight, and waved her hand to him when he turned to signal a last farewell. She said to herself that she certainly loved him. What a pity that there should be a difference—possibly rather a wide difference—between loving and being in love!

END OF VOL. I.

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